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Old wine in new bottles?

Re-awakening of nationalism in Southeastern Europe

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In Southeastern Europe, the process of democratisation and Europeanisation as a major paradigm since the beginning of the 2000s made the EU and many in the Western Balkans believe the time of wars and nationalist excesses belongs to the past. Recent events teach us the contrary. The new rise of nationalism across the Western Balkans is the major challenge for the European democratic project for the region.

Looking at the history of the Former Yugoslavia since the late 1980s one can easily argue that politics of nationalism and nation-state building based on strict borders between nations and newly established identity boundaries have become major features in the processes of state dissolution of the Socialist Yugoslavia and lately nation-state constructions in the Post-Yugoslav region.

The final transformation of the Yugoslav society started in 1989 and was marked by the celebrations on the Field of Blackbirds (*Kosovosko polje*) on the 28th of June, a symbol for new demarcation lines within the broader Yugoslav society. Nearly one million Serbs gathered to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo Polje.

Slobodan Milošević, who had taken power in Serbia in 1987, gave the major speech during the celebrations and launched the final phase of his nationalist-populist campaign against alleged discrimination of Serbia within the Yugoslav state. By reminding the crowd of possible violent conflicts in the near future and deploying all his rhetorical power to draw thick lines of distinction between Serbs and “unfriendly” nations within the Yugoslav federation Milošević marked the beginning of new form of power politics based on the resource of nationalism.



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“Deep and still persistent demarcation lines and cleavages between the people of the Balkans function as a politics making repository to this very day.” Picture of a man in Novi Sad, Serbia (2016).

Nationalist explosion: Ghosts of the 1990s

From this point on, the crisis of the Yugoslav state became acute and the dissolution unfolded. Milošević’s nationalism triggered new forms of nationalist political formations in other republics. Franjo Tuđman emerged as Milošević’s counterpart on the Croatian side, leading Croatia into independence while at the same time promoting the ethnically homogenous Croatian nation-state.

At the beginning of the 1990s the already deep gap between the Western republics of Slovenia and Croatia on the one hand and the alliance formed around Serbia on the other was rapidly widening, culminating in the demolition of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia in January 1990 and subsequently in violent conflicts and wars. Socialist Yugoslavia went up in flames. The ‘rebirth’ of nations and, as a consequence, new national borders in Southern Europe led to a nationalistic frenzy with numerous victims and new national borders in the Balkans marked not only by new states but also new strong and exclusive ethnic and national identities.

Demarcation from the ethnic ‘other’

The fight for the demarcation from the ethnic ‘Other’, fought by all means, became the main feature of politics in the region in the 1990s, only to be perpetuated in the subsequent period of the so called ‘transition to democracy’. The interpretation of the recent past based on exclusive narratives about the events of the 1990s became a power resource – fully in place until today – which is able to nurture new potential conflicts and re-affirm strict border and demarcation lines between ethnic groups, nations and newly established states in the Balkans.

Deep and still persistent demarcation lines and cleavages between the Croatian and Serbian narrative, the Bosniak, Croatian and Serbian narrative in Bosnia-Herzegovina or the one between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs (or further to the South between the Greek and Macedonian narrative), to this very day function as a repository for making politics today.

So, fast-forward to 2015. It were the events at the peak of the ‘refugee crisis’ in the region that will help illustrate the new rise of nationalism and demonstrate how old ghosts of the past can easily be re-awakened in the present to serve as a legitimization tool for politicians.

Serbia vs. Croatia: New nationalist contest since 2015

Developments at the so called ‘Western Balkans-Route’ brought the region back into the European headlines. For months this route from Macedonia through Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia served as a major arterial road for refugees on their way to the ultimate goal of reaching Germany, Austria and other Western European countries.

The already fragile and rather unstable Western Balkans’ states have struggled to cope with masses of refugees, which resulted in the nearly explosive rise of nationalisms throughout the region. Following a period of enhanced and intensified regional cooperation and normalisation since 2000 the ‘refugee crisis’ re-opened and/or re-fueled old identity conflict lines thus contributing to an increase in nationalist rhetoric and behaviour.



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Refugees at the border crossing between Serbia and Croatia in October 2015.

What has happened in 2015? In July, Hungary began building a barrier along its 110-mile border with Serbia, triggering an immediate reaction from the region: governments sealed more borders, introduced trade bans and began insulting each other. The response to Hungary’s fence-building came quickly, and a domino effect played out across the region. As

Hungary closed borders, Serbia decided to divert refugees across its border to Croatia. Zoran Milanović, the then prime minister of Croatia, demanded that Serbia sends some of the refugees to Hungary or Romania and pledged he would not allow Serbia to “make fools of us.”

The Serbia-Croatia refugee dispute escalated into a trade war. Belgrade closed the main Bajakovo-Batrovci border crossing to all trucks with Croatian plates, or those transporting goods made in Croatia. In retaliation, Croatia closed the crossing to cars with Serbian plates. Croatia then went on to block trucks coming from Serbia at Bajakovo-Batrovici in a further attempt to pressure Belgrade to redirect the migrant flow towards Hungary and Romania.

Very quickly, both Serbia and Croatia ramped up the rather nationalist rhetoric. They started trading blame and accusations of lying, while at the same time openly and aggressively disparaging each other's actions as “pathetic” or a “disgrace”. What was striking is the fact that highest officials were engaged in reviving the old inflammatory rhetoric, which reminded very much of the rhetoric of the 1990s.

An infamous exchange

One of the most illustrative examples of this was the infamous exchange between the then Serbian Prime Minister Vučić and former Croatian Prime Minister Zoran Milanović. The debate was sparked by Serbian Social Affairs Minister Aleksandar Vulin (today Minister of Defence), who following the closure of all but one border crossing between Croatia and Serbia by Croatia authorities said: “I am sorry to see that Croatian humanity and solidarity lasted just two days,” immediately warning the neighbours that Serbia intends to take the issue to the international courts.

Nationalism, so strongly dominating the relationship between Serbia and Croatia at the beginning of the 1990s, is back again

From a new strong position for Croatia in the region as a member state of the EU Milanović responded sharply and compared Serbia's state power with a fly, which symbolizes something small and unimportant. And he added “(An) eagle does not hunt flies. Croatia is an eagle.” Then immediately the Foreign Minister of Serbia, Ivica Dačić, answered with a quote from a very famous Former Yugoslav movie ‘The spy from the Balkans’ (*Balkanski spijun*), ‘The eagle was downed’. And finally, Prime Minister Vučić said he wouldn't take the bait, sending a message to Zagreb that Serbia will do everything it can to protect its interests.

The tensions and nationalist rhetoric that emerged in the fall of 2015 continued and even escalated against the background of the final verdict against (and acquittal of) Vojislav Šešelj at The Hague Tribunal in March 2016. And even more, the harsh debates and rhetorical infights continued until today. Nationalism that so strongly dominated the relationship between Serbia and Croatia at the beginning of the 1990s and led to wars, is back again and shapes the daily agenda of both states.

Obviously, Serbia and Croatia are not the only states in Southeastern Europe where we can observe a dramatic rise of nationalism. It is truly a regional phenomenon, and we could go on endlessly listing all the cases of nationalist agitation in the region, ranging from Bosnia's

endless ethno-political and nationalist infight to Kosovo-Serbian relations where almost on a daily basis nationalist energies are refueled and instrumentalised by politicians on both sides to legitimize the internal political agendas.

“All I need is nationalism”: Nationalist re-awakening in Macedonia under Gruevski

A very interesting case of nationalist re-awakening in service of increased authoritarian politics is Macedonia. It was the former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski – in power in Macedonia from 2006 until the beginning of 2017 – who based his politics on the deeply rooted identity politics and on nationalism. It was the former ruling parties’ VMRO-DPMNE^[1] nationalist position in regard to the question of the country’s name that helped Gruevski start mobilizing Macedonian people based on strong nation appeals.



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A massive statue of Alexander the Great at Skopje’s central square is a reference to a new national identity that builds on historic grandeur.

Against the background of 82,1 percent of ethnic Macedonians declaring in 2010 that for them the preservation of the name Republic of Macedonia had priority over EU and NATO accession, Gruevski started exploiting Athen’s harsh stance in regard to the name of

Macedonia to consolidate his own leadership as well as the dominance of the ruling party VMRO-DPMNE.

‘Skopje 2014’

Gruevski embarked on re-inventing Macedonian national identity. The reconstruction of the centre of the capital under the project ‘Skopje 2014’ has been the expression of a new and outspoken ethno-nationalism and has represented the desire to reconstruct the Macedonian

nation based on historical myths and narratives. A massive statue of Alexander the Great at Skopje's central square is a reference to a new national identity that builds on historic grandeur.

The statue of one of the greatest conquerors in history is also a clear signal to the defiant neighbours; Greece and Bulgaria. Although the use of 'Skopje 2014' as a symbol of a new ethnically Macedonian nationalist narrative has been very divisive and was contested among large parts of the Macedonian population (particularly among ethnic Albanians), yet it managed to address the feeling of national pride among supporters of VMRO-DPMNE and a significant part of Macedonian Slavs. In this case, nationalism at the cost of polarisation between the ethnic groups in Macedonia served as a unifying source within the party's power base.

Gruevski embarked on re-inventing Macedonian national identity

The clash in Kumanovo...

The highly explosive situation in Macedonia and Gruevski's approach to politics based on nationalism were highlighted by the events in Kumanovo (May 2015). Kumanovo is a city with a history of tensions between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians. In May 2015 eighteen people were killed (eight police officers and ten belligerents) and more than 30 injured during a police raid in reaction to street protests.

According to the authorities about 70 armed ethnic Albanians clashed with Macedonian police forces. A few weeks before, a group of 40 ethnic Albanians had seized control of a police station near Kumanovo, claiming the creation of an Albanian state within Macedonia. Gruevski and the ruling VMRO-DPMNE utilized the events to stage a public campaign highlighting the preservation of stability and the need to protect the Macedonian nation from "terrorists". In consequence of the events, 20 people were arrested and accused of terrorism.

...culminating in Gruevski's demise

In the following days opposition parties organized rallies against Gruevski. The ruling VMRO-DPMNE responded by organizing a counter-rally in support of Gruevski and his government. The rhetoric, symbols and references applied were reminiscent of the nationalist rhetoric of the late 1990s and early 2000s, a period when Macedonia was on the brink of war.

What followed since 2015 was a long struggle of Macedonian people on the streets ('Colourfull revolution'), a lot of pressure by the international community and a mobilisation of oppositional forces against the authoritarian course of Gruevski, which all together contributed to Gruevski's sudden demise. The new Macedonian government under Prime Minister Zaev is setting a new tone, but will have to go a very long way to get rid of negative nationalist ghosts consciously re-awakened by Nikola Gruevski.

Nationalism as an ultimate challenge to European and democratic values in Southeastern Europe

Back in the 1990s Bosnian sociologist Dzermal Sokolović argued that ethnic identities are prone to fluctuations, which means that phases of the euphoric and hypertrophic eruption of national identity and nationalism alternate with periods of national lethargy and national indifference. The transitions from one state to the other, according to Sokolović, very often occur fast and surprisingly, playing in a relatively short period and are usually very stormy.

The state of euphoric and hypertrophic eruption of national identity and nationalism can be triggered fast and surprisingly, the more so in situations where (like in the Former Yugoslavia) a sufficient repository of nationalism and identity politics as a legacy of the 1990s is shaping the political arena. In Southeastern Europe, the process of democratisation and Europeanisation as a major paradigm since the beginning of the 2000s made Europe and many in the Western Balkans believe the time of wars and nationalist excesses belongs to the past and that all countries of the region are set to reach the shores of the European Union soon.

Recent events teach us the contrary: What we have been witnessing in the Western Balkans since the beginning of the refugee crisis is precisely this kind of trigger revealing the underlying conflicts in the region. The new rise of nationalism, which goes hand in hand with an increase of authoritarian tendencies across the Western Balkans, is the major challenge for the European democratic project for the region. The general crisis of the EU has played a role in damaging the EU as a democratic role model for its Eastern and Southeastern neighbours.

As a matter of fact the EU's attractiveness has suffered a lot, putting the enlargement project – or, to put it differently, the completion of the European peace project – into jeopardy. How to stop nationalist energies from spreading over the region and finally, how to reclaim democratic values, remains the ultimate task not only for the region but also for Europe and its peace project in the Balkans.

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[1] VMRO-DPMNE: Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity.

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