



Milenko Petrovic

THE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION OF POST-COMMUNIST EUROPE

In the Shadow of
Communist Differences and
Uneven Europeanisation



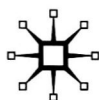
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In the Shadow of Communist Differences
and Uneven EUropeanisation

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*To my mother and
in memory of my father*

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Foreword

There can be no doubt that in the first five to ten years after the fall of their communist governments the Balkan states stumbled and faltered on their way to parliamentary democracy and the construction of a market economy. Perhaps fearing something worse, Balkan electorates kept a hold of their communist nurse. Thus the old communist parties, renamed and partially restructured, built new power bases. The old élite remained, its power redistributed and redesigned in no small measure by the flitching and stashing away of much of the meagre amounts of much-needed foreign inward investment they managed to attract. Why this was so is clearly explained in Dr Petrovic's text. He shows that the Balkan states' different evolution during the transition from communism came about because the communist system in the region differed from that in other parts of communist-dominated Europe. This is an important argument. Too frequently in the days of the Cold War, it was assumed that all communist systems were the same. That they had many similar features and characteristics was true, and those similarities were more apparent during the standoff between East and West, than were the differences. That was because most Western observers viewed Eastern Europe from the outside rather than the inside; their perspectives were distant and their perceptions generalised. In fact, real differences developed within the general East European system, and those differences deepened during the decades of communist party dominance. Dr Petrovic's book is the first to concentrate upon and fully explain this important phenomenon.

Some Balkan communist idiosyncrasies are obvious. The fact that the Soviet Union did not have to fear "imperialist" invasion through that area meant that in foreign policy terms the Balkan states were kept on a looser leash than those to the north, above all the GDR and Poland, which might provide the pathway for such an incursion. Yugoslavia was the first to strike out alone and it was left untouched, at least in the military sense, because initially Stalin and his colleagues believed it would collapse once Soviet trade, investment and

assistance were cut off; "I shall shake my little finger and there will be no more Tito", boasted Stalin. When Albania's communist leaders took offence at Khrushchev's rapprochement with Tito and threw in their lot with the Chinese comrades, Moscow accepted this with little concern. The Albanians could never be a threat to Soviet security and the loss of the Soviet submarine base at Sasun meant little in the age when inter-continental ballistic missiles were being developed; even more so because in the late 1950s the Soviet Union enjoyed a clear superiority over the West in this area. In the 1960s, particularly after Nicolae Ceauşescu came to power in 1965, Romania set out to distance itself from the Kremlin. It did not go as far as Albania towards alignment with the Chinese but it did attempt to play the honest broker between Moscow and Beijing. And whilst Yugoslavia was expelled from COMINFORM and was never a member of the Warsaw Pact, Albania resigned from the latter and Romania remained within. It was independent within rather than of the alliance. Moscow would not have tolerated this if Romania had been of the same strategic importance as the GDR or Poland. Romania's economic individuality, expressed most forcefully in its rejection of plans for specialisation in production within Comecon, might also be interpreted as a sign not of Romanian strength but of its relative insignificance; one reason why the Soviet Union had been so concerned at the Czechoslovak reform programme of 1968 was that, if carried much further, the reforms could have led to the convertibility of the Czechoslovak crown; had that happened vital goods for other Comecon economic programmes would have become much more expensive. There was no such danger from Romania. Of the Balkan states, in foreign policy only Bulgaria remained a totally dependable Soviet satellite; and Bulgaria did not do badly from that because the Soviet Union supplied it with oil at favourable prices, so favourable indeed that Bulgaria was able to export enough of the oil to cover its own considerable budget deficit.

In other areas, Balkan differences from other communist systems are less easily identified, and scholars will be grateful to Dr Petrovic for making them clear.

Dr Petrovic performs another important service in examining the former Balkan states' relationship with Europe. He brings to light a factor which most Western observers have failed, or have not wished to record. When the Balkan states had begun making significant

progress in the building of open systems based on the rule of law and representative democracy and were in a position to make serious application for membership of the European Union, the EU was by then beginning to feel "enlargement fatigue", and was, perhaps as a result of this, becoming much more demanding of and discerning towards new applicants. This meant that Bulgaria and Romania faced tougher requirements with regard to crime and corruption, and it also means that future aspirants, with the possible exception of Croatia, will be subjected to even tougher scrutiny.

There is also the question of boundaries and the unresolved and undefined status of the multi-national states in the western Balkans. Here again, the West can be blind to its own role in creating or perpetuating these problems. The decision that the internal boundaries of the former Yugoslavia must remain intact led to many difficulties. Those boundaries had been drawn up towards the end of or immediately after the Second World War by men who believed the process was of little long-term importance because social and political progress towards socialism and communism would mean that such lines of division were of diminishing significance. That borders drawn up in such a fashion should be made sacrosanct by the West is one of the many ironies of recent Balkan history.

* * * * *

As Dr Petrovic states, the tardiness of the Balkan transition is not in dispute. But he is right to insist that this was not a manifestation of some form of ineluctable Balkan exceptionalism. Despite the work of serious historians, many journalists and commentators rapidly fell back on the assumption that Balkan states had always been corrupt and tyrannous and their societies forever backward and conservative. Above all, came the oft-repeated cry that Balkan troubles were the inevitable outcome of "ancient ethnic hatreds".¹

¹ The classic exposition of the serious historian is in Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997; its opposite is to be found in Robert D. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993.

The denigration of the Balkans is a much-better established tradition than the faults which it claims to identify. As soon as tensions arose in Yugoslavia, TV pundits and radio interviewers were proclaiming that the First World War had begun in the Balkans in 1914. They did not mention and were almost certainly unaware of the fact that there were Balkan crises in 1885, 1898, 1903, 1908, 1912 and 1913 which did not lead to a major European conflict. The First World War, like all wars between major powers, was caused because those major powers themselves chose to go to war; a Balkan crisis was the occasion not the cause.

Another frequently declaimed myth is that the Balkans had always had authoritarian and unaccountable governments, and that democracy had not taken root in such uncongenial soil. In fact, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the Balkan record in such matters could bear comparison with many in the remainder of Europe. Individual liberties and freedoms such as those of expression and association were considerably greater in the independent Balkan states than they were in Spain or Russia. All Balkan states had constitutions which guaranteed those liberties and provided for the election of legislators, usually on the basis of universal male suffrage. It is true that clientelism and electoral management were rife; but were they absent in Spain, Ireland, Italy or Portugal? Or in Boston, Mass., Chicago and New Orleans? The constitutions of Serbia and Bulgaria provided for unicameral legislatures and those assemblies could at times make life uncomfortable for their executives. In Bulgaria in 1915 the Agrarian party leader Aleksandŭr Stamboliiski spoke out furiously and fearlessly in an unsuccessful attempt to prevent Bulgaria's government taking the country into the First World War. And in Serbia immediately before the First World War, the real power in the land was the elected and largely popular leader of the Radical Party, Nikola Pašić. Romania's constitution was older than the others in the peninsula. Here the representative system was complicated by a system of electoral colleges, or *curiae*, a phenomenon also seen in the Habsburg, German and Russian empires. Romania also differed from Serbia and Bulgaria in having a bicameral legislature. In Romania politics became a contest between two élite groups who, copying their British counterparts, called themselves Liberals and Conservatives. Though curial system made the franchise more restricted in Romania, the system nevertheless allowed for peaceful

changes of government, the press remained free and the rule of law was largely upheld.

That Romania differed from the other pre-1914 Balkan states in having a bi- rather than a unicameral legislature was a reflection in part of the fact that its social system differed in one important respect from those of the other Balkan states. With the exception of Albania, which had hardly become a functioning state when the European war broke out, Romania was the only Balkan state which had anything like a landed aristocracy. In the other states, the majority of the population were small peasant farmers. In 1907 Romania experienced a wide-ranging *jacquerie*, not dissimilar to that in Russia two years previously. The revolt of 1907 set Romania on the road to social reform, a process which was completed after the First World War with extensive programmes of land redistribution.

A similar process took place in Croatia and Slovenia, Habsburg territories which had had large estates, owned mostly by Hungarians and Germans respectively, and which were now incorporated into the new Yugoslavia. But this was a European not a Balkan phenomenon. It had begun in Ireland with Wyndham's Land Act, passed by the British parliament in 1903, and was widely adopted in the new Czechoslovakia, the Baltic states, and, somewhat more hesitatingly, in Poland. In Eastern Europe only Hungary held aloof, though the need for such reforms was apparent there, but no more so than in Spain.

The Balkans were also part of other common European movements. Co-operative organisations had developed in the nineteenth century to provide credit, to encourage production and to facilitate distribution and sales. They had thrived in the German states, Denmark, France and also in the Balkans. Here they provided protection against the rapacious usurer. They were a powerful indicator of social self-help, frequently mobilising the peasantry, the intelligentsia and the clergy together in an unprecedented fashion. But again, this was not Balkan exceptionalism. It was part of a general European or world movement. There were powerful co-operative movements and Agrarian parties not only in Bulgaria and Serbia but also in Croatia, Slovenia, the Czech lands, Poland, Hungary, the Baltic states, Scandinavia, Canada and the United States.

In their general political evolution in the inter-war period, the Balkan states again followed the general European pattern: the

gloomy one of the descent into dictatorship. Bulgaria's Agrarian government was removed in a violent military-backed coup in 1925 but parliamentary rule was restored in 1926 and lasted until another, less bloody, coup in 1934. In 1929 Yugoslavia's King carried out a coup to impose authoritarian and centralised rule. A tribal leader in Albania had taken the crown and done the same thing in the preceding year. Romania's parliamentary system petered out in the early 1930s. Ironically, the Balkan country which was later to be first past the post in the race for EU membership, Greece, had the most turbulent internal history of all the Balkan states. It had experienced military coups before the First World War, but further deep divisions were created when its King differed deeply from his prime minister of Greek policy in the war. These already serious rifts were made infinitely worse by the tragedy of Greece's defeat in the Anatolian war of 1919–1922 against the new Turkish Republic.

But the Balkan states did not differ from the rest of Europe in this. Hungary had hardly developed a functioning parliamentary system at all; Poland moved towards authoritarianism and military rule in 1926 and 1930; Estonia limited the power of political parties in 1926 and adopted presidential rule in 1934; in the same year the president of Latvia assumed vast personal powers; Lithuania had gone the same way in 1928. And then there were the larger states. Italy fell to Fascism in 1923, Germany to Nazism in 1933, Spain dissolved into disorder and then civil war in the mid-1930s, and France very nearly underwent a similar disaster.

The Balkans therefore did not differ politically from the rest of Europe in the inter-war period. They also experienced much of the same economic and social trauma. Inflation generally struck in the post-1918 years but had been overcome by the mid-1920s. Then came the Great Depression. In the Balkans, as elsewhere, governments did what little they could to protect their impoverished peasantry and to stimulate their economies. In the Second World War, like the rest of continental Europe, the Balkans suffered the conjoined tragedies of war, defeat and occupation.

After the war the communists assumed power in all Balkan states except Greece, and here they probably would have done so had Stalin not kept to his bargain with Churchill in 1944 to divide the Balkans between East and West, a division which left Greece firmly within the western zone of influence.

It is under the rule of the communists that Balkan exceptionalism is developed. And that process is admirably explained in the pages which follow.

R.J. Crampton
Oxford

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

BSP	Bulgarian Socialist Party
CARDS	Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation
CE	Council of Europe
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy (EU)
COMECON	Council for Mutual Economic Assistance
COMINFORM	Communist Information Bureau
EA	Europe Agreement
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EC	European Community
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FH	Freedom House
FYRM	Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GDR	German Democratic Republic
GNI	Gross National Income
GNP	Gross National Product
HDZ	Hrvatska demokratska zajednica (Croatian Democratic Union)
HSS	Hrvatska seljačka stranka (Croatian Peasant Party)
HSWP	Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPA	Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
LCS	League of Communists of Slovenia
LCY	League of Communists of Yugoslavia
LSYS	League of Socialist Youth of Slovenia
MDF	Magyar Demokrata Fórum (Hungarian Democratic Forum)
MRF	Movement for Rights and Freedoms (Bulgaria)

NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NSF	National Salvation Front (Romania)
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PHARE	Poland, Hungary, Assistance to the Restructuring of the Economy
PUWP	Polish United Workers' Party
SAA	Stabilisation and Association Agreement
SAP	Stabilisation and Association Process
SFRJ	Socijalistička Federativna Republika Jugoslavija (Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia)
UDF	Union of Democratic Forces (Bulgaria)
UN	United Nations
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VMRO	Vnatrešna Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization)
WTO	Warsaw Treaty Organisation (Warsaw Pact)