DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

# The strengthening of the illiberal front in the Western Balkans

Alejandro Esteso Pérez



Aleksandar Vučić, President of Serbia, attends the Widening Europe's Horizons session at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in Davos-Klosters, Switzerland, on January 19, 2023. Photography: World Economic Forum/Ciaran McCrickard

After the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the fall of communism in Albania, and three decades after the start of their respective democratisation processes, the six Western Balkan countries have advanced at different speeds in building their democratic systems. Wide-ranging civil liberties have been guaranteed through regular multi-party elections and, in general terms, the separation of powers has been enshrined. At the same time, however, many of the region's political elites have become entrenched in informal power structures, based on clientelist practices and undemocratic capture. The media, judiciary, non-governmental organisations and political opposition have been the main targets for attacks to undermine democratic principles and actors. On multiple different levels, the Western Balkans are witnessing the emergence and consolidation of regimes outside the strictly liberal archetype, as many have veered towards a kind of decaffeinated autocracy.

The political fortunes of many of these patrons of governance – embodied in figures such as Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, the president of the Serb entity Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina Milorad Dodik, former Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, and former Montenegrin minister Milo Đukanović – have been revived, or directly endorsed, by the European Union and other Western partners. In turn, the influence of

other international and regional powers, such as Russia, China and Turkey, has helped entrench these leaders in power, through economic, energy-related, geopolitical and ideological channels, fuelling authoritarianism to facilitate prolonged periods in office.

Today, according to the Freedom House index, the six Western Balkan republics hold the status of "hybrid regimes", nominally plebiscitary democracies in which democratic institutions remain fragile and the protection of political rights and civil liberties is limited. [1] To the pronounced democratic decline in Serbia, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, at the hands of their long-serving leaders, may be added that of North Macedonia, whose new conservative government seems intent on replicating the anti-democratic practices of its former illiberal leader. In Montenegro, a fragile coalition threatens the potential for change of its young pro-European executive, at the mercy of its pro-Serb and pro-Russian partners, while in Kosovo the governing party's progressive majority is making slow but steady progress towards improving democratic conditions in the country.

## From independence to rapture

The 1990s saw the birth of a patchwork of new republics in the Western Balkans – with Montenegro and Kosovo still attached to Serbia – that gradually began their respective nation-building processes. The first autonomous structures reaffirming the state gave way to the institutionalisation of civil and political frameworks, subsequently progressing towards the tentative consolidation of multi-party systems. This slow progress towards democratisation and the market economy, dominated by a neoliberal agenda, was channelled towards the new states' possible entry into the European Union. However, the end of the first decade of the 21st century saw the emergence of new patterns of authoritarian governance, marked by tighter and more informal control over incipient state institutions. [2]

The six Western Balkan republics have moved at different speeds in what appear to be "reverse transition" processes, whereby democratic victories have been gradually diluted in favour of illiberal consolidation. The European Union is today the most influential partner in the region and yet has been one of the clumsiest actors in preventing democratic decline. The spate of crises over the past 15 years (the economic crisis in 2007, the peak of the refugee crisis in 2015, Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic) has significantly reduced EU Member States' interest in and attention to democratic improvement in the Western Balkans. This has negatively affected the attitudes of the 27 countries towards EU enlargement policy.

> The six Western Balkan republics have moved at different speeds in what appear to be "reverse transition" processes, whereby democratic victories have been gradually diluted in favour of illiberal consolidation

Over the last two decades, successive governments in the region have morphed towards models of perpetual rule with the establishment of illiberal policies, generally based on dense clientelist networks of corruption. The electoral gains by some of the political parties that are or have been in power (such as the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (DPS), the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (VMRO-DPMNE) and the Socialist Party of Albania (SP)) are based on manoeuvres to weaken the opposition, attack the separation of powers and limit public freedoms. The range of practices includes manipulating elections, control of the media, control over public funds to benefit networks aligned with the party and attacks on the independence of the judiciary. These and other groups often build their political viability on ties with organised crime and drug and human trafficking, which often influence the political decision-making process.

Illiberal leaders —present and past— in the Western Balkan countries have tended to consolidate their power in similar ways. Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia, Milo Đukanović in Montenegro, Milorad Dodik in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Nikola Gruevski in Macedonia have all benefited from being young, reformist and pragmatic in the eyes of their Western partners. All rose to the top as moderate ideological figures with the acquiescence of European Union governments.

## “Authoritarian but stable”, an EU maxim

With enlargement policy as its tool, the European Union has committed to progress towards democratic reforms and a transition to market economies in the Western Balkans. The axis of progress and driver for change has been the so-called “principle of conditionality”, whereby the European Union has sought to guarantee democratic development and shield the rule of law in the region, rewarding liberal transformation through economic stimulus and investment, as well as speeding up of the respective EU accession processes. Although the enlargement mechanism is *a priori* pragmatic, the loss of popularity for the tool has undermined the true effectiveness of the principle of conditionality. [3]

Current shortcomings in the EU enlargement system have consolidated the leadership of illiberal heads of state and government in the Western Balkans. In addition to ineffective support for the protection of the rule of law and civil liberties in the region, the European Union’s traditional deference to national leaders who manipulate the rules of the game for their own benefit has been compounded by the European Union’s traditional deference to national leaders who manipulate the rules of the game for their own benefit. At the same time, within the EU community, the lack of consensus and geopolitical quarrels among the 27 Member States have hindered establishing rigid criteria for conditionality and reward, including whether to penalise candidate countries that fail to follow the democratisation agenda. This has proved a breeding ground for more reactionary and authoritarian policies in the region, more intensely so in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, with the arbitrary arrests of journalists observed in Serbia, while corruption linked to the procurement of infrastructure and medical equipment came to light in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Montenegrin historian Srđa Pavlović coined the concept of “stabilocracy” in 2016 to define a political system with obvious democratic shortcomings that presents itself as a guarantor of stability and progress. The stabilocracies of the Western Balkans have offered the European Union a gateway to reliable and long-lasting alliances with figures such as Aleksandar Vučić and Milo Đukanović, strong leaders who managed to shore up power with little competition, and not without illicit methods. In practice, the European Union has fostered a situation of dependence on governments with little democratic ambition that also manages to please Brussels.

> Current shortcomings in the EU enlargement system have consolidated the leadership of illiberal heads of state and government in the Western Balkans

The enlargement project has long been undesirable for the more reluctant Member States, who argue that integrating the Western Balkans would risk further democratic reversal within the European Union, leaving decision-making to potentially illiberal leaderships. The experiences of Hungary, Slovakia, Italy and, until recently, Poland demonstrate the fragility of the rule of law within the European Union itself, which not only raises doubts but also reveals a paradoxical position in the EU democratisation strategy for the Western Balkans.

## Illiberalism at home: the role of Hungary

Hungary is not only notable for its fractious role as a Trojan horse within the European Union. Budapest has consistently supported the accession processes of the Western Balkan countries, but Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, in the relations with these countries, has emerged as one of the most important exporters of the illiberal model to the region, especially through strategic ties with some of their leaders, particularly Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia and Milorad Dodik in Republika Srpska.

Hungary’s economic, energy, geopolitical and ideological interests in the Western Balkans have motivated Orbán to forge closer ties with Vučić and Dodik. Hungary has found in Serbia a reliable economic partner to converge with on border security and ideological alignment: they share similar visions on the enrichment of the respective political and economic elites. Budapest and Belgrade have been pursuing substantive bilateral policies to reaffirm their diplomatic rapprochement and entrench their co-dependence, prioritising long-term mutual benefit. Moreover, in the context of the ongoing dispute between Serbia and Kosovo, Orbán voiced his support for Belgrade and obstructed Pristina’s attempts at international consolidation and legitimisation, as evidenced by Kosovo’s pending application for full membership in the Council of Europe. [4]

Hungary has another faithful partner in Republika Srpska. Despite being on the US sanctions blacklist, Dodik and his circle have weathered economic defeat thanks to an

influx of Hungarian capital to develop energy and investment projects. Given his good relations with Dodik, Orbán has emerged as the only real interlocutor between Brussels and the Bosnian Serb entity, thereby demonstrating the Hungarian prime minister's mediation skills. [5]

Both Vučić and Dodik have consolidated their power through illicit methods of capturing local and state institutions. Under Hungary's patronage, both have a reliable partner within the European Union and, above all, a voice to defend their interests in its institutions, ensuring their impunity. Hungary's power of veto in the European Council ensures authoritarian dominance over EU efforts at democratisation.



Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán participates in the EPP Political Assembly on March 20, 2019. Photo by European People's Party

## Reversing the illiberal model?

The Western Balkans have been home to powerful examples of struggle and resistance among activists and civil society. Citizen cohesion has at times managed to challenge the consolidation of illiberal and authoritarian leaderships and demonstrated the potential of citizen power in the face of diminishing freedoms.

Electoral participation and accountability at the ballot box, even if elections are far from free and fair, can help effectively channel political discontent with illiberalism. The timid

emergence of green and civic parties, such as the platforms of Možemo in Croatia, Moramo in Serbia and Hoćemo or Naša Stranka in Bosnia and Herzegovina, are a small sample of the new cross-cutting ideological currents that are breaking through ethnic, national and linguistic divides. The Serbia Against Violence movement (*Srbija Protiv Nasilja*), a conglomerate of political parties opposed to the regime of Aleksandar Vučić's party, became the second most voted force in the Serbian elections in 2023. Despite falling far behind Vučić's party in terms of seats, the movement has emerged as the main avenue of political outrage towards the ruling party which, after more than a decade in power, has managed to infiltrate virtually all Serbia's institutional and social strata. In addition, the latest parliamentary elections in Kosovo, held in 2021 in the context of a political crisis marked by the pandemic, demonstrated the power of the ballot box: the progressive Self-Determination (*Vetëvendosje*) movement managed to win a comfortable victory, reversing the illiberal trend of previous governments, associated with the authoritarianism of the old political elite.

Another axis of civic activity that has caused major setbacks to the illiberal model in the Western Balkans is social movements and protests. The best-known example was the Colourful Revolution in Macedonia in 2016, which led to the fall of the illiberal prime minister at the time, Nikola Gruevski. The movement, which lasted for three months, succeeded in uniting various ideological fronts and political agendas through the common goal of defeating the main government party, the conservative VMRO-DPMNE. Pressure on the streets prompted high-level political negotiations under European Union and American arbitration. By the end of 2016, new elections had been held under close international scrutiny and by mid-2017, Gruevski had been sidelined and Zoran Zaev, leader of the Social Democratic opposition, sworn in as the new prime minister.

Despite the considerable success of the Colourful Revolution, not all episodes of social mobilisation in the Western Balkans have been equally successful: many end in a bottomless pit, while others are put down by police violence. Civil society in the region generally lacks cohesion and a unified agenda to confront the illiberal threat with a common front. European Union support as a key ally to these sectors is not enough.

> The Western Balkans have been home to powerful examples of struggle and resistance among civil society, showing the potential of citizen power in the face of diminishing freedoms

The illiberal model can be reversed as quickly as it can resume. This is the case of (now "North") Macedonia, where the two elections in May 2024 left an institutional scenario similar to the one that prevailed in the country a decade ago. Former leader Nikola Gruevski's VMRO-DPMNE party won major victories in both the parliament (43.32%) and the state presidency in the second round (69.01%), convincingly defeating the Social Democratic party. This opens up an uncertain scenario for North Macedonia: the new government will unreservedly embrace Gruevski's authoritarian legacy and call into

question diplomatic agreements with Greece and Bulgaria, two cornerstones of the country's EU integration.

## REFERENCES


1 — Freedom House – Nations in Transit Methodology. Available online.
2 — Bieber, F. (2020). *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
3 — Richter, S.; Wunsch, N. (2019). "Money, power, glory: the linkages between EU conditionality and state capture in the Western Balkans". *Journal of European Public Policy* 27 (1): p. 41-62.
4 — Esteso Pérez, A. (2024). "A triangle of (mis)trust: Hungary's enlargement stakes in Serbia and Kosovo". *BiEPAG Policy Analysis*: p. 1-36.
5 — López Domènech, B. (2024). "Orbán's illiberal 'tentacles' in the Western Balkans: What implications for EU enlargement?". *EPC Discussion Paper*: p. 1-16.



**Alejandro Esteso Pérez**

Alejandro Esteso Pérez is a researcher and political analyst specialising in the Balkan space and European Union enlargement policy. He is an associate researcher at the Legal and Political Studies Group in Pristina (Kosovo) and he is a member of the teaching team for the Geopolitics of Frozen Conflicts diploma at the Complutense University of Madrid. He is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Graz (Austria) with a thesis on local illiberal practices in Serbia and Kosovo. He is a regular contributor to international media, with analytical articles on EU enlargement policy and party politics in the Western Balkans.