Is Europe losing the Balkans?

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Across the Balkans, the process of de-Europeanization is all-embracing and radical. Miljenko Jergović warns of a new bout of conflict and urges Europe to re-engage.

When the Turkish president gave his daughter away in May last year, the wedding guests included high-ranking politicians, government ministers and members of the Turkish general staff. A significant international trio was also in attendance: the Albanian and Pakistani prime ministers, Edi Rama and Nawaz Sharif, and the Bošnjak [1] leader and member of the presidency of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bakir Izetbegović.

A combination of Islamic ritual and secular spectacle, the ceremony was very much in keeping with the general nature of the Recep Tayyip Erdoğan regime. The bride was wearing a hijab, but also the kind of wedding dress that was not exactly typical for Muslim women and might have been more in keeping with the nuptials of a European princess. The reception included a short film revealing the fair Sumeyye’s (Erdoğan’s daughter) private preoccupations, what she had looked like as a child and what she was interested in as a teenager.

Sharif is a key supporter of Erdoğan’s drive to position himself as leader of the world’s Muslims, a modern-day Caliph who would combine the authority of an American president with that of the Pope of Rome. Rama’s worldview, however, is a long way from Erdoğan’s and his understanding of parliamentary democracy is significantly different. Yet they both share the same pragmatic interests. Turkey is keen to present itself as Albania’s defender in the Balkans – a fact that the Albanian premier is only too eager to exploit. And if the Sarajevo media are to be believed, Izetbegović attended the wedding as Erdoğan’s personal friend. As Erdoğan himself describes it, Izetbegović’s father, Alija Izetbegović, made a deathbed promise in which he entrusted Bosnia and Herzegovina to Turkey’s guardianship.

This bequest is a frequent topic of discussion in Sarajevo, although usually with scant regard for the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country of three nations and three faiths, and that it would be hard to find anyone among the other two nations who would accept Turkey as a guardian. But then such lack of consideration for one’s neighbours is hardly a characteristic of the Bošnjaks alone. In BiH, it is something of a national imperative.
Patron saints

Recep Tayyip Erdoğ​an is by far the most popular politician among Bošnjaks. And, apparently, this is not something that bothers Izetbegović. The popularity of the Turkish leader, on the contrary, bolsters Izetbegović’s own position and provides the Bošnjaks with a powerful moral backing in any argument with their Serbian and Croatian neighbours. Bošnjaks feel protected by the favour of the Sultan on the Bosphorus and are ready to follow him with an ardour similar to that of his Turkish adherents. When Erdoğ​an calls the Dutch and Germans fascists and Nazis, he enjoys the tacit support of the Bošnjak political elite, and the open support of both the popular masses and a large section of the Sarajevo media. When Erdoğ​an accuses the Dutch of having organised the Srebrenica massacre with the ultimate intention of exterminating all European Muslims, Izetbegović stays silent, allowing the Turkish leader to cooly exploit the victims of a nation other than his own, as if they were his own property, or a recently raised bank loan.

A parallel status is enjoyed by Russian President Vladimir Putin among the Serbs of the Republika Srpska (the predominantly Serbian entity that, along with the Bošnjak-Croatian Federation, makes up Bosnia and Herzegovina). Republika Srpska’s president Milorad Dodik heads off to Moscow to secure protection for his semi-secessionist referendum and when the US State Department imposes (albeit symbolic) sanctions, Russian emissaries arrive in Dodik’s capital Banja Luka to stiffen his resolve.

Hardly a day goes by without the media in both Republika Srpska and Serbia proper reporting on the return of Russian influence in the Balkans and Central Europe. A certain pluralism of opinion still exists in Belgrade, where Putin’s followers have to constantly argue their case with those of a more pro-European perspective. However no such nuances of opinion exist in Banja Luka. For the Serbs of Republika Srpska, Putin is a demigod, a status rather similar to that enjoyed by Erdoğ​an among the Bošnjaks. It is just a shame that Putin does not currently have a daughter to give away – otherwise he could invite his Serbian-Orthodox friends to the wedding.

The Belgrade authorities, embodied by the increasingly well-entrenched former prime minister and now president, Aleksandar Vučić, have for years been following a policy of equidistance between Brussels and Moscow. On the one hand they declare their determination to join the European Union as quickly as possible, while on the other hand they insist on brotherly relations with Russia. (The fact that everything in the Balkans is reduced to the level of familial metaphors is an interesting subject in itself: for Bosnian Muslims, Turkey is a mother; for Bosnian Serbs, Orthodox Russia is a mother; and in Serbia itself, Russia is a brother.) It is a balancing act that seems to imitate the foreign policy of Tito’s Yugoslavia, a state that was always at its strongest when steering mid-way between Washington and Moscow. The aim of such a policy is clear; to get as much out of both sides as possible; to use brotherhood with Russia as a way of blackmailing Europe; and closeness with Europe as a way of blackmailing the Russians.

Easy prey

However that is a dangerous policy to overplay. Not only because a brotherly embrace can sometimes lead to cracked ribs, but also because it stokes national sentiments that
are difficult to control. Ordinary citizens, devastated and demoralised for decades by poverty, nationalism, clericalism and populist politics, are easy prey for Putin and Erdoğan. When people are desperate, dictators prove more attractive than democrats – especially in the Balkans, where people have spent most of the last 20 years being disappointed by the politicians that orderly democratic procedure has burdened them with.

This is something that all the peoples of former Yugoslavia increasingly have in common (with the possible exception of Slovenia, which in this respect ceased to be a member of the region a long time ago): a deepening hostility towards both democracy and European ideals.

The attitude towards Europe is particular striking. In a recent public opinion survey, for instance, citizens of Serbia were asked whether they would prefer to be part of the EU or the Eurasian community led by Moscow. A worryingly large number chose the latter. Yet when they were asked which way of life they would prefer – that of Moscow or Brussels – even those who positively viewed Eurasia, admitted that they would prefer Brussels. One can assume that people in Sarajevo would give similar answers if they were asked to choose between Erdoğan and Jean-Claude Juncker.

What happens, then, when Putin and Erdoğan, so recently at the brink of war with each other, suddenly appear to be the best of friends? One answer to this question emerged just after the recent initiative of several Bošnjak politicians, members of left-wing parties who had, until recently, declared themselves as multi-ethnic. Led by Emir Suljagić, who managed to escape the Srebrenica massacre due to his status as a UN translator, the group called for an improvement in relations between Sarajevo and Belgrade – a rapprochement that would take place against the background of current goodwill between Russia and Turkey. The declared aim of these closer relations would be the exclusion of Croatia from any discussion about Bosnia and Herzegovina’s future and the erosion of the right of Croats to be considered a constituent nation of BiH. The current triplistic Bosnia and Herzegovina would be thus replaced by a dualistic Serbian-Bošnjak one.

The initiators of this plan justify the initiative by pointing to the supposed pro-Ustaše, pro-fascist nature of official Croatian policy (indeed any Croatian policy) and the fact that Croatia is already waging a “hybrid war” against Bosnia and Herzegovina. This war – the precise details of which are never revealed – is being carried out with the help of Europe and Brussels who, they insist, “betrayed Bosnia and the Bošnjaks” and are working for their destruction. Indeed the radical nationalism of the Bošnjak left is proving itself to be significantly more radical than that of Izetbegović. Their contempt for Europe is strong. This attitude, to be sure, is by no means exclusive to the Bošnjaks. It also prevails – with local variations, of course – among Serbs and Croats, in BiH and Serbia and Croatia proper.

**De-Europeanism**

The case of Croatia is perhaps the most striking. It has been a member of the EU since the summer of 2013. Not only did people still have faith in the idea of European enlargement, they also widely touted the belief that Croatia would be the locomotive
pulling the whole Balkan region towards Europe. Four years later, not only are relations in the Western Balkans worse than at any time in the past 20 years, but Croatia itself is even less pro-Europe now than it was when it was negotiating to join the Union. The process of Croatia’s de-Europeanisation is shocking, all-embracing and radical. It is far more than just a question of marginal political groups and isolated extremists; it involves the governing elite and, indeed, the state itself.


In February this year several hundred neo-Nazis (members of a legal political party called the A-HSP [or Autochthonous Croatian Party of Rights]) held a military-style drill on Zagreb’s main square, in a sign of support for the American President, Donald Trump. The gathering was given a police escort, even though there were no signs of a counter-demonstration. The group marched through the city centre carrying American and Croatian flags, alongside the banner of the NPD, (the German National Democratic Party), one of the most explicitly neo-Nazi groups in Europe.

The American embassy reacted with a statement recalling American casualties in the Second World War, adding that it was a gross insult to display the American flag in the context of a neo-Nazi rally. The Croatian President, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, was the next to respond, but instead of condemning the gathering, she described it as a marginal phenomenon that had attracted more attention than it deserved.

This was merely the latest in a series of incidents which, rather like the probing moves in a football match, have been increasing in frequency since Croatia became a member of the EU. The pace has quickened significantly over the past 18 months, mainly due to the arrival of a radical right-wing coalition in power supported by the local Catholic Church. The ultimate aim of all this activity is to reverse the outcome of the Second World War – 70 years after the event – to denounce anti-fascist partisans as criminals, proclaim the Ustaše (Croatian quislings) and Nazis as liberators, and to rid public life of all minorities – whether political, social, sexual, religious or ethnic. Human rights are to be radically cut back, or at least subjected to the moral codes of the Catholic Church, doing away with the right to abortion and demonising anyone who might protest against it. Anti-fascism, over the last few years, has become a dirty word. When someone is described as an anti-fascist, for instance, it usually comes with the suggestion that they are also an enemy of Croatia. Notions such as liberalism and leftism fare just as badly - and the less said about atheism, the better.

Ready for war?

In such an atmosphere, what does the concept of Europe actually mean? And what do European values mean for Croatia and its political leaders? There is no direct answer to a question framed in such terms because concepts like these are not given a concrete definition in the Balkans. Instead they react to it in an effective way. It is this reaction that decides what is good and what is bad; what is desirable and what is undesirable; what is Europe and what is anti-Europe.
From a Croatian perspective, or at least from the perspective of state television, the majority of newspapers and the current political leadership, it is clear what is considered positive about Europe, what is considered burdensome and what is barely tolerated. On the positive side are those currently in power in Poland and Hungary, and Brexit (which was greeted with enthusiasm and euphoria – the victory of Donald Trump in the US was also received with maximum enthusiasm). The defeat of the Freedom Party candidate in the Austrian presidential election and Geert Wilders’ poor result in the Dutch general election, were met with open disappointment. Internet fora, social media, newspapers and state television are filled with conspiracy theories, involving liberals, communists, masons and Zionists who, with the help of international Islam, have driven “true” white Europeans to electoral defeat.

Equally striking is the extent to which both Croatian and Serbian nationalists appear to be in agreement when it comes to Trump, Orbán, Wilders, Nigel Farage and Marine Le Pen. On most other issues, however, they would be ready to go to war against each other at the drop of a hat; but they happily line up together behind Donald Trump. Indeed, they would line up behind anyone who had spent the last few years trying to undermine the Europe that came into being after 1945, or indeed anyone who advocates driving Syrian refugees (or perhaps all Muslims) out of Europe.

In fact, the refugee question is one of the few issues that divide Serbian and Croatian nationalists on one side from Bošnjak nationalists on the other. The Bošnjaks cannot fully identify with Trump and his European associates because of the latter collective Islamophobia. All of which makes it easier for Bošnjak nationalists to dismiss European opinion as a whole, arguing that the European right and left are essentially the same (or, as Erdoğan might say, they are all fascists and Nazis).

The Western Balkans is, once again, ready for war, but not in quite the same way as in 1991. Then, the subjective conditions of a disintegrating Yugoslavia meant that people were ready to fight for their own (on the whole territorial) rights, regardless of Europe and the rest of the world. With the help of a formerly all-Yugoslav army, the Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević set about conquering as much territory as possible to the west, which he then tried to cut off from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The then Croatian President, Franjo Tuđman, aimed to preserve the territory of the Republic of Croatia and, in time, increase it with the addition of parts of BiH. The Bošnjaks fought, on the whole, for their sole survival. None of these groups were taking part in someone else’s war; on the contrary, they were fighting for their own destiny.

**A Balkan sacrifice**

The situation is quite different today. The nations of the Western Balkans are readying themselves for a war similar to the ones that began in 1914 and 1941. They need a wide context in which to settle their scores. They seek a war where they can die for foreign kings, emperors and sultans: for Putin, Erdoğan, Trump, or second-rate nutcases like Wilders or Le Pen, or some other wily populist whose name we are yet to hear but whose photo-fit portrait we can already visualise.

The Balkans have again become an arena for the kind of diplomatic manoeuvres that threaten one day to take on military shape. It is here in the Balkans that the Russians
have, after an absence of a quarter of a century, returned to the European stage. And it is here in the Balkans that the Turks are re-establishing a presence in the very areas they were driven out of just over 100 years ago.

So has Europe sacrificed the Balkans? Before the outbreak of the First World War, it looked as if European powers had succeeded in pacifying the region. Austria-Hungary had secured an international agreement for the establishment of a protectorate over Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1878 and by 1908 had annexed the country outright – a move that nobody (with the exception of Serbia) seriously opposed. In the course of the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, Turkey was pushed back all the way to the Bosphorus. Russian attempts to increase its influence in the Balkans, through Serbia and the South Slavs of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, were a serious nuisance factor but not a major threat to peace. And then Gavrilo Princip killed the heir of the Habsburg throne in Sarajevo and, as we know, barely one month later the whole of Europe was at war; a war caused by paltry South-Slav rivalries of which Vienna, Berlin, Paris, Moscow and London knew very little indeed.

Europe has not quite lost the Balkans yet, but it will lose them soon if it remains blind to the consequences that might follow from such a loss. The price of Europeanising the Balkans today is probably higher than it was 20 years ago – when a golden opportunity to bring stability to the region was missed. But it remains incomparably cheaper than the price to be paid in the event of the Balkanisation of Europe. When Turkey’s foreign minister talks of the coming religious wars in Europe and when he claims that there is no difference between European social democrats and fascists, he is counting on the anti-European sentiments of Bosnian Muslims, Albanians in Macedonia, perhaps even Albania itself.

We still have time to upset his calculations. It is just a question of whether the various capitals of Europe really understand what Turkish and Russian calculations in the Balkans actually amount to.

**Footnotes**

1. The term Bošnjak here is designated for the Bosnian Muslim ethnicity which makes up one of three main ethnicities of Bosnia and Herzegovina (along with Serbs and Croats).

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