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Children of Transition, Children of War

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The Youth in the Balkans Between Democracy and Nationalism

As it is often pointed out in the literature of political science and international relations, the bloody events from 1990s in the Balkans have had a long-lasting impact on every citizen, especially on children and youth who have faced the biggest human tragedies in Europe after the World War II. These young generations have experienced the political transition and subsequent democratization reforms, on the one hand, and nationalization processes, on the other, which has affected them deeply in terms of personal development as a democratic and open-minded citizen. In this paper I will thus examine the youth of the former Yugoslav Republics who experienced political change through the violence of war that led to the creation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, FYR Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia. As they now have reached adulthood, it is of utmost importance to explore how this generation deals with the past, present, and future. It is indeed interesting and pioneering work to study how they see the possibility of living together with others from diverse social and national communities.

It is puzzling that many of these children support nationalistic political parties and extremist movements and feel mistrust towards their fellows from other ethnic groups although they have been raised under democratic regimes without gaining any direct war experiences. I will thus compare the cases of children in the Balkan countries in terms of their political viewpoints in order to comprehend what are the factors which caused lack of democratic culture and nationalistic feelings among the young generations in these countries. Is it because of institutional deficiencies, political context, ethnic myths, religion, family environment, education or simply the lack of daily interethnic interactions? I believe that it is essential to explore this very topic as a small contribution for brighter and more peaceful future of children and youth in the Balkans. That is, in the light of the political and social developments on the Western Balkans within the process of European integration, it is important to know what young people themselves think about the European Union, about their lives and their place in the future society (Božović, 2013).

Political Participation and Democracy

Previous scholarly works have demonstrated that political participation and dynamic youth are a central pillar of democracy, since citizen engagement can have considerable impact on the quality of democratic rule (Robertson, 2009). Also, the citizens in genuine democracy trust institutions and are active and engaged, and respect pluralism. On the other hand, Diamond and Morlino (2004) point out that the rule of law, participation, competition, vertical accountability, horizontal accountability, freedom, equality and responsiveness are pillars of democracy. O'Donnell (2004) extends the list to include human development and human rights. Still,

successful democratization depends on the existence and functioning of democratic political institutions (Linz and Stepan, 1996; Schedler, 1998; Schneider and Schmitter, 2004), economic performance (Przeworski et al., 1995) and socio-cultural cohesion (Lipset, 1994). In the aftermath of bloody events in 1990s in the Balkans, the region has been passing through democratic reforms within the process of Europeanisation.

The recent studies show that young people from the Balkans have a positive image of the European Union. Also, the majority of young people from the Balkans believe that the EU membership would contribute to the democratic consolidation in the region, as well as to the necessary reforms in economic, social and political area. According to the young people who participated in the survey (Božović, 2013), joining the EU is one of the best things which could happen to all countries in the Western Balkans. Generally, majority of young people from the Western Balkans believe that the EU accession of their countries is going well, but not as well as it actually could (Božović, 2013). When asked what associates them with the words “European Union”, most of young people from the Western Balkans said that those are words: Europe, European institutions, membership (66%). The most interesting option answers from the survey are: Brussels, Eurovision, Schengen system, European identity, multiculturalism, tolerance, dialogue, European values, neo liberalism, opportunity and democratic deficit (Božović, 2013).

The EU integration and Democracy

The research has showed that the process of EU integration has been successful in building democracy and functioning market economies in Central Eastern Europe (CEE) (Vachudova, 2005). However, it is interesting to study to what extent it can be successful in South East Europe (SEE) or the Western Balkans (Verduna and Ruffa, 2011). These EU reforms lead not only to EU integration but also to state-building and democratization (Denti, 2014). Notwithstanding the variety of theories to explain the process of EU integration from its inception to the present (Rosamond, 2000; Wiener and Diez, 2004; Pierson, 1996), the inclusion of SEE was viewed from a conflict management perspective to strengthen peace-building processes in the region (Belloni, 2009). Also, the process of Europeanisation is often linked with democratic reforms in the Balkans.

Still, prior democratization studies have rarely looked at youth as an agent in democratic processes in the region. It is mainly the younger generation that will have expectations from the democratic rule in the Balkans in the future. It will require good education, good jobs and social security in order to give the younger generation a positive outlook on their future (Hurrelmann and Weichert, 2015). In addition, youth is potentially a factor for change not only in democratic but also in autocratic societies. That’s probably why they are so much of interest to scholars.

A Lack of Democratic Tradition

In order to thoroughly comprehend and analyze the process of political participation of the citizens in the country Jürgen Habermas’s notion of citizen recognition provides an adequate theoretical framework as a basis for constructive debate. For instance, Habermas examines cases where the cultural or national identity of citizens prevents their political participation in the public sphere with the rest of society denying them basic human rights. According to Habermas, the public spaces characterized by serious violations of basic human rights by other citizens there exists “an incomplete or unequal inclusion of citizens, to whom full status as members of the political community is denied” (Habermas 2005: 16). Simply put, Habermas

supports the thought that democracy is only possible with widespread presence of inclusive participation in a society. Also, in the view of discursive theorists it is important to maintain not just maximal inclusion but also equality of effectiveness in the exercise of communicative freedom among all the citizens who participate in the democratic process (Knight, Johnson 1995: 302).

No doubt that violent conflicts and subsequent challenges to state and nation building efforts have prevented the advance of democratization in SEE (Pridham, 2000). In the post-conflict period, power sharing imposed a complicated institutional design for the functioning of democracy in the region (Bieber, 2013). Also, authoritarian parties prevented regime change and impeded democratization (Dolenec, 2013), and the absence of sovereignty and state legitimacy presented problems for democratization (Vucetic, 2004). A lack of democratic tradition, weak institutions and weak civil society were another set of obstacles facing democratization (Jese Perkovic, 2014). Currently some countries in the region are regarded as democracies (e.g. Slovenia, Croatia, Romania and Serbia), while others are labelled as hybrid regimes (e.g. Montenegro, Albania, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo) (Berglund, Ekman, Deegan-Krause and Knutsen, 2013). Slovenia and Croatia are regarded as being ahead in democratic development, while Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia are still considered to be fragile.

For example, Bosnia and Hercegovina has faced serious problems regarding its democratic reforms. That is, Bosnia has been unable to make democratic progress because of structural impediments set in the Dayton Peace Agreement, permanent instrumentalization of ethno-nationalism and prolonged socio-economic problems (Dzihic, 2012). In Serbia, there is dwindling zeal for activism and participation in political activities, and the majority of citizens expect change to come from outside (Matic, 2012). Also, its citizens are dissatisfied with democracy, since the future is not improving (Matic, 2012). In general, in most countries in the region trust in institutions and politicians is low, there is a growing antiparty sentiment, and it seems that there are no longer any reformist-oriented elites (Krastev, 2002).

Although there have been few interesting examples when young people from the region tried to bridge ethnic divisions and interact with ethnic others (Hromadzic, 2011), generally the youth in SEE place less trust in people whose religious affiliation and political beliefs are different from their own (Hurrelmann and Weichert, 2015). Thus, the youth in the region have a limited potential for building social capital and extending their social networks, and especially in regards to building genuine democratic culture that can overcome any kind of religious or political divisions.

Social and Political Diversity

Also, a limited percentage of youth in the region accept social and political diversity. For example, across the different countries, when asked whom they would prefer to have as a neighbor, young people are most likely to choose a family from the EU or the United States, and also to some extent a family from another Balkan country (Hurrelmann and Weichert, 2015). On the other hand, most of the youth in SEE do not want to have homosexuals or Roma as their neighbors. Therefore, they might not be the best agents for advocating pluralism and social diversity (Hurrelmann and Weichert, 2015). Also, according to Kacarska (2012), youth in the Balkans have the highest levels of trust in their family members and friends and generally do not trust people from neighboring countries or those living in their own country who come from different ethnic backgrounds.

In addition, the research has showed that over 90% of youth in the various countries identify with the main religion(s) in their country, but religious practice is mainly relegated to religious holidays (Hurrelmann and Weichert, 2015). However, the majority of youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia said that they would not marry someone who was of a religion different from their own. Also, about 37% of youth in Croatia and over 20% in Albania would not marry a person of different religion, and youth in Western Balkan countries do not feel keen to marry a person from a different ethnic community (Kacarska, 2012). On the other hand, the youth in the region have similar opinions about which institutions they trust the least, with political parties ranking at the top of almost every nation's list. Thus, widespread distrust in the main democratic institutions indicates dissatisfaction and disappointment among youth with the functioning of democracy in their country. Many previous studies have proved that lack of trust in democratic institutions leads to dissatisfaction with democracy.

Satisfaction with Democracy?

In most Balkan countries the rates of dissatisfaction are higher than the rates of satisfaction. For instance, in Macedonia only 6.2% are very or somewhat satisfied with democracy, while 44.5% are very or somewhat dissatisfied. In Slovenia, 7.9% are very or somewhat satisfied with democracy, and 59.8% are very or somewhat dissatisfied. In Bosnia, 18.4% are very or somewhat satisfied with democracy, and 36.3% are very or somewhat dissatisfied. In Croatia and Kosovo the youth who are satisfied with democracy are marginally more numerous than those who are dissatisfied (See the Table 1). These results clearly show that young people in the region are not satisfied with democracy (Hurrelmann and Weichert, 2015). This is not necessarily a criticism of democracy as a political regime, but it demonstrates a clear dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy in their countries. Also, the youth in Kosovo and Macedonia report the most interest, while the youth in Romania, Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are least interested in national politics.

	ALB	BIH	BG	CRO	KOS	MK	RO	SL	Mean
Satisfied	24.1	18.4	12.0	25.7	24.3	6.2	18.3	7.9	17.1
Notsatisfied	27.8	36.3	46.0	21.0	23.8	44.5	43.9	59.8	37.9

Table 1. (Dis)satisfaction with democracy, combining answers for “very” and “somewhat” in percentages

Furthermore, the voter turnout in the Balkans also varies by country. According to recent studies, electoral participation of youth in Slovenia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina is below 20%, in Romania it is around 20%, in Bulgaria and Croatia it is 25-30%, in Albania it is around 30%, and it is over 40% in Macedonia (Hurrelmann and Weichert, 2015). Notwithstanding the differences in voter turnout, most of the youth in the region do not feel represented in political arena. For example, only about a third of the youth in Albania and Kosovo feel that they are represented by the people who are active in politics. Whats more, around 60% of the youth in Bosnia, and even more in the other countries (e.g. over 70% in Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Slovenia) feel that they are not represented in politics (Hurrelmann and Weichert, 2015). Thus, participation requires trust and the belief that citizen action could influence decisions made by those in power. Mierina (2011) describes the reinforcing nature of trust and participation: “the better political authorities perform, the more people will trust them, the more trusting and efficacious they will feel, and the more likely they

will be to take part in democratic processes". Without young people having confidence in the system and the leadership of their nation, researchers have raised concerns that this could lead to the "erosion of legitimacy of the foundations of the nation and representative government in the next generation" (Torney-Purta et al., 2001, 93).

Domination of Nationalistic Politics

As a result, political, social and legal domination of nationalistic political parties in the region has prevented the process of building genuine democratic and inclusive societies in the region. For instance, Kukic claims that the goal of nationalistic politics has been to maintain a certain level of frustration among ordinary citizens and thereby to maintain a logic of exclusiveness and distrust toward the other ethnic groups and in such a way to extend their rule (2005: 15). Thus, in post-Dayton Bosnia the majority of citizens are in a position of homo duplex or a divided human since they are in a struggle between being a genuine human being and loyal ethnic being. While transition to democracy should bring about participation and inclusion of diverse groups into public policy-making the post-war Bosnian public sphere has been increasingly dominated by an ethno-political matrix causing discrimination against each citizen in the country who does not declare himself as a member of the three biggest ethnic groups. As Fareed Zakaria claims: In countries not grounded in constitutional liberalism, the rise of democracy often brings with it hypernationalism and war-mongering. When the political system is opened up, diverse groups with incompatible interests gain access to power and press their demands. Political and military leaders, who are often embattled remnants of the old authoritarian order, realize that to succeed they must rally the masses behind a national cause. The result is invariably aggressive rhetoric and policies, which often drag countries into confrontation and war (Zakaria 2003: 114).

Similarly, Roger Friedland defines this phenomenon as a religious nationalism claiming that: Ethnopolitics puts forward a particular ontology of power, an ontology revealed and affirmed through its politicized practices and the central object of its political concern, practices that locate collective solidarity in ethnic affiliation tied to particular religions, as opposed to contractual and consensual relations between individual citizens (Friedland 2001: 126). Therefore, only a liberal-democratic model of political organization can help to resolve political and social problems in the Balkans. As Gutmann argues:

"Basic human rights are instruments to protect and respect individuals as creative subjects or agents. Democratic states, therefore, should give priority to basic rights over the claims of cultural groups that are incompatible with those rights, whether the group is called a nation, a culture, or the state itself" (2003: 79).

Conclusion

Generally, post-communist countries have lower levels of political and institutional trust compared to other European countries with longer democratic tradition (Mierina, 2011, 34). For instance, in their comparison of youth political attitudes in eight western European and SEE countries, Hooghe and Wilkenfeld (2008) stated that Scandinavian countries had the highest levels of political trust and SEE and eastern European countries the lowest. Torney-Purta's (2002) study found that most nations with trust in government levels above the international mean were those with over 40 years of democracy. Still, being active in politics and civil society are not very common among youth in SEE. In contrast, religion is important for young people's identity. Youth do not trust formal institutions, but place more trust in family and friends and

they are dissatisfied with democracy and often completely disengaged from politics (Hurrelmann and Weichert, 2015). Previous studies proved that youth are more willing to support democratization if there remain a greater range of challenges. That is, if the young are dissatisfied and frustrated, then they are more likely to contribute to regime change (Weber, 2013) and the youth are more willing to play bigger role in political change during critical times (Chisholm and Kovacheva, 2002). Still, in the Balkans that has not been the case since youth are not so willing to actively participate in political arena and to seek for democratic reforms.

No doubt that violent conflicts and subsequent challenges to state and nation building efforts have prevented the advance of democratization in the region. In the post-conflict period, power sharing imposed a complicated institutional design for the functioning of democracy and authoritarian parties prevented regime change and impeded democratization. Also, the absence of sovereignty and state legitimacy presented problems for democratization. Although there have been few interesting examples when young people from the region tried to bridge ethnic divisions and interact with ethnic others, generally the youth in SEE place less trust in people whose religious affiliation and political beliefs are different from their own. Thus, the youth in the region have a limited potential for building social capital and extending their social networks, and especially in regards to building genuine democratic culture that can overcome any kind of religious or political divisions. Only a low percentage of youth in the region accept social and political diversity. For example, when asked whom they would prefer to have as a neighbor, majority of young people in the region are most likely to choose a family from the EU or the United States. Without trust and tolerance between the youth from different ethnic and religious groups, it is almost impossible to speak about living in genuine democracy. One of the political consequences has been two decades long rule of the domination of nationalistic political parties where the citizens are in a position of homo duplex or a divided human since they are in a struggle between being a genuine human being and loyal ethnic being.

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