

# THE BALKANS: DEMOCRACY WITHOUT CHOICES

*Ivan Krastev*

*Ivan Krastev is director of the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia, Bulgaria. This essay is drawn from "The Inflexibility Trap: Frustrated Societies, Weak States, and Democracy," a report on the state of democracy in the Balkans that he initially drafted in February 2002. The final version of this report will appear on the National Endowment for Democracy's website ([www.ned.org](http://www.ned.org)).*

The Balkans today still appear to be an explosive mixture of weak states, nonstates, and present or future protectorates. In reports to policy makers, the region is described as a place where borders (when defined) are soft, identities are hard, reform policies have failed, and the future is cloudy. While we do not know just how many of Southeastern Europe's de facto states are functioning, and to what extent, we do know that today they are all democracies: The parliamentary elections that took place on 17 November 2001 in the former Serbian region of Kosovo mean that each country or entity in the region now has a representative assembly. A decade ago, the region's biggest problem was the prevalence of nondemocratic states. Today the problem is that there are more democracies than sovereign states in the region, and yet there has been less political change than supporters of democracy had expected.

These contradictory trends make toting up democracy's balance sheet in the Balkans a daunting task. On the positive side, the major political actors in the region do not question democracy's status as the only legitimate and desirable form of government. Citizens are sorely disappointed with the status quo, but are not—or at least not yet—drawn to undemocratic alternatives. The military is in its barracks; Slobodan Milošević is in the dock at The Hague; elections are regularly held. In comparison with, say, the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia, Southeastern Europe shows constant progress in democratization.

On the negative side, there is a justified fear that the Balkan democracies as a group are more fragile than we had suspected. Trust in

democratic institutions is dramatically low. Parliaments rarely receive more than a 20 percent approval rating in opinion polls (in Macedonia, the figure is only 6.9 percent), generalized antiparty sentiment is growing, there is little confidence in politicians, and voter turnout is falling. The recent presidential and parliamentary elections in Bulgaria and Romania revealed high volatility in voter preferences. The intellectual climate has deteriorated, and illiberal and anti-Western ideas are gaining influence. The reformist agenda of the elites is no longer the agenda of the publics.

The latest public opinion poll from Bulgaria, a country that Freedom House rates as a consolidated democracy, shows that according to the public the last 12 years have been a chronicle of wasted time. Half of all respondents claim that the situation has worsened since 1989, with 33 percent claiming that it has not changed, and only 17 percent seeing improvement. Fully 62 percent of Bulgarians say that they would prefer to live in a different age. The figures from Macedonia are even starker. Asked whether they consider that in general their country is moving in the right direction, 62 percent of the citizens of that republic say no and only 12 percent approve of the direction in which they see things moving.

The apparent gap between citizens' perception of the status quo and the view held by the international democracy-promotion community is at the heart of the questions hanging over the future of democracy in Southeastern Europe, and points to the unsettling conclusion that what we are seeing is a crisis of democracy rather than a problem of not-yet-completed democratization.

In democratic politics, perceptions are in a sense all that matter. People's perceptions determine how they vote, how much money they save, whether they want to emigrate or not, and whether they feel more inclined to cooperation than conflict. If we adopt an analytical framework that focuses on citizens' perceptions, the notion of transition is not a useful one. What is a "transition" for the expert is their life for the people. Most residents of Balkan lands believe that they live in democracies, however imperfect. They weigh the advantages of democracy not on the basis of some ideal type that sprang from the brow of the political-science professoriate, but in light of their own experience. It is naïve to believe that their disappointment with the status quo will have no effect on the level of trust they are willing to place in the democratic system.

Over the last decade, experts, commentators, and decision makers developed a habit of viewing the Balkans from the perspective of the most endangered country. In 1993 it was Bosnia that shaped the picture of the region. Later, the Balkans were typically viewed through the lens of the dramatic developments in Kosovo and Belgrade. More recently still, Macedonia has become the paradigm shaper. But when daily headlines and a concomitant sense of "emergency" dominate analysis, distortions can easily occur. Analyses of Balkan politics produced over

the past ten years read like reports of natural disasters. They argue for sanctions or aid but fall short of understanding the logic of policy failures.

We propose instead to view the chances for and challenges to sustainable democracy in the region through the experience of Bulgaria, the most democratically developed of all Balkan countries. Might the democratic fragility of “successful” Bulgaria—and not the democratic deficits of some of the other countries—give us an idea of the gravest challenge facing Balkan democracies in the medium to long term? Bosnia in 1993, Kosovo in 1999, and Macedonia in 2001 were all worst-case scenarios that materialized. Bulgaria, on the other hand, is viewed by many as a realistic model for what Balkan democracy could be. It is the dangers of this model that we will try to illuminate.

Focusing on Bulgaria gives us a sense of the problems that confront efforts at democratic consolidation throughout the region. The unexpected political developments that the year 2001 brought to Bulgaria are an additional reason for adopting such a framework.<sup>1</sup> In parliamentary elections that June, Bulgarian voters turned out the region’s most-praised reformist government (lead by Premier Ivan Kostov) and elected one headed by the ex-king Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. The king’s movement—which did not even exist until just 90 days before the elections—took half the 240 seats in the unicameral National Assembly. It was nothing short of an electoral revolution (or perhaps an epidemic). The king’s movement swept aside the two major parties—Kostov’s Union of Democratic Forces and their Socialist rivals—and won majorities at every level of age, education, and income. It carried 28 out of 31 regions in the country. In November, the voters amazed observers yet again by ousting Petar Stoyanov, the region’s most highly praised reformist president, despite endorsements of him by the UDF, the ex-king’s movement, and several other democratic parties. The voters’ choice for president was Socialist leader Georgi Parvanov, who just a month earlier had been thought unelectable.

The trend toward protest voting in the Balkans had already emerged in the Romanian parliamentary and presidential elections in the fall of 2000. Opinion polls from other countries in the region record the same trend. Will the protest vote run the Balkans? If so, what kinds of parties, persons, and ideas will it bring to the fore? Are we observing a shift toward Latin American-style “delegative democracy”? Why do “reformists” spectacularly lose elections? Is all this a sign of democracy’s growing strength, or of its increasing weakness?

Despite the diversity within the region, some common patterns and tendencies are clear. All the Balkan countries have had to cope with dramatically falling living standards. None save Albania has yet returned to its 1989 level of GDP. In most, a deindustrialized economy exists alongside a social structure more or less like that of an advanced indus-

trial society. All are places of rising social inequality. All suffer from the absence of a durable democratic tradition. All share a profound sense of insecurity. In nearly all of them—again, Albania is an exception—people feel pessimistic about the near future, and see membership in the European Union as the best thing that could happen to them.

### How Not to Think About the Balkans

Our goal is to take a fresh look at what is actually happening in the Balkans, without the blinders imposed by the dominant analytical paradigms. Shifting away from the dominant paradigms does not mean rejecting all their findings, but it does require us to recognize that none of them really captures what is happening in the Balkans today, for none grasps the internal logic of recent events. Let us discuss each of the three leading paradigms in turn:

**1) *The “Bad Legacies” Paradigm.*** This conceptual scheme, rooted in arguments about history and culture, was popular in the earlier stages of the dissolution of Yugoslavia. It received its classic formulation in the 1996 report of the international commission on the Balkans entitled *The Unfinished Peace*, which defined the major impediments to effective democracy in the Balkans as “legacies of war, of communism, and of history.”<sup>2</sup> The report’s recommendations focused on “the development and revival of civil society,” regional and interethnic projects, rewriting the region’s history textbooks, and so on. It defined press freedom as key to promoting democracy in the Balkans, but by “free” media meant mostly freedom from government interference and paid little attention to the dangers of special-interest control over media content.

*The Unfinished Peace* influenced most of the international democracy-aid programs. The unspoken assumption was that ethnopolitical problems were primary and that the treatment of minorities was the leading indicator of democratic achievement. Nongovernmental organizations were to be sought out and fostered as the best partners for democracy-building projects. This approach did not succeed in separating post-Yugoslav problems from the problems of postcommunism. With violent nationalism identified as the leading threat to the democratic process, political parties and individual politicians were judged primarily on the basis of their record vis-à-vis nationalism. This explains why the liberal elements of the former communist elite so easily won favor with the international community. Politics was thought to be a clash between “civics” (including most ex-communists) and “ethnics.”

While it is undeniable that ethnic issues have often played a critical role in Balkan politics, explanations centered on ethnicity have already passed their peak of popularity. They are still applied to Serbia and to some extent to Macedonia, but they are no longer influential in policy

circles, even if they continue to shape international media coverage of the region. The reality is that if nationalism does surge in the region, it will much more likely appear as anti-Western populism or anti-Roma xenophobia than as the nineteenth-century type of nationalism that was so prominently on display when Yugoslavia broke up in the 1990s.

**2) *The Democratic Transition Paradigm.*** Thomas Carothers has recently provided a subtle criticism of this well-known model in the pages of this journal.<sup>3</sup> All new democracies are supposed to follow one and the same path. Democracy is analyzed less as a matter of relations between leaders and led than as a set of institutions whose existence and effectiveness can be measured in concrete ways that are commensurate across cases. The appeal of such a conceptual “yardstick” to experts looking for hard data and bureaucrats looking for reportable results should be obvious. Yet the transition paradigm, because it ignores the internal logic of politics and the ways in which citizens view their governments in new democracies, cannot account for events like those in Bulgaria, where voters “inexplicably” throw out incumbents who get high marks from the West.

The paradigm’s tendency simply to presuppose the presence of a functioning state is another serious drawback, as we can see by looking at the way in which the problem of Kosovan independence was treated in the transition paradigm. In 1991, Western policy makers hoped that democratization would bring peace and stability to the Balkans. At first they saw the dissolution of Yugoslavia as an episode in the larger story of collapsing communist regimes. The Yugoslav wars were explained generally as products of the undemocratic nature of the old political system, and specifically as parts of a clever strategy devised by former communist elites anxious to maintain their power.<sup>4</sup> The orthodox policy line was that democratization would defuse ethnic tensions and save existing states from violent secessionism and irredentism. This explanation has some validity, but the bitter experiences of the last decade point out its limits.

The dissolution of Yugoslavia showed that when a society feels it must choose between democratization and self-determination, it will prefer the latter. The belief that democratic change in Belgrade would take independence off the Kosovars’ agenda turned out to be unrealistic. The sequence of political change in Croatia is another powerful example showing that successful democratization is possible only after state consolidation has been achieved.

Another key misconception of the transition discourse is its implicit belief that the devolution of state power is *ipso facto* good for emergent civil society. The victory of democracy was understood in terms of the withdrawal of the state and the concomitant rise of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). But did a proliferation of NGOs, most of which

depended on Western sponsorship to get going and stay afloat, really betoken the strengthening of civil society and the consolidation of democracy? Can civil society be said to flourish in places where the state does not function and the rule of law is absent?

The transition paradigm is misleading not only because of what it assumes to be the case in the present but also because of what it fears might happen in the near future. In other words, it is shaped by the fear of sudden democratic breakdowns, and tends to think of democracy in terms of its opposite, authoritarianism. But the threats to democracy now, when it has few open enemies and overtly undemocratic alternatives are in retreat, are not the same as they were in the 1970s. The biggest danger for democracy today is not sudden but rather slow death, meaning a gradual process of erosion and delegitimation that destroys democratic regimes even as their surface institutions remain in place, much as termites eat the foundations of a house without visibly disturbing its outer walls. In this “democracy without politics” scenario, the truly representative character of democracy is hollowed out from within, behind a shell of democratic institutions. This, and not some sudden authoritarian reversion, is the major risk that the Balkans face today.

**3) *The Development/Integration Paradigm.*** This third and most influential of the faulty paradigms is a relative latecomer, meant to replace the exhausted “legacy” and “transition” approaches. The EU currently favors this paradigm, which now stands as the only long-range vision for the Balkans. It holds that preconditions clearly matter. Democracy needs a healthy economy, a healthy institutional environment, and a functioning state if it is really to take root and flourish. The World Bank’s March 2000 strategy paper “The Road to Stability and Prosperity in South Eastern Europe” is the best illustration of this approach.<sup>5</sup>

Like the transition paradigm, this approach evaluates any new democracy mainly on the basis of its level of institutionalization, and then adds a strong dash of technocratic thinking: Strengthening democratic institutions is seen mostly as a legal and bureaucratic challenge. Policy deliberations and those who win and lose from them are not considered terribly important—the experts already know what the best policies are and feel confident that in the long run they will make everyone a “winner.” Policy implementation is what matters, and here hard constraints such as pegged currencies or shifts to the Euro can be very helpful. In its purest form, the EU integration paradigm views the political challenges in the Balkans in terms of building EU member-states. The institutional environment in the region is judged exclusively in terms of its compatibility with EU norms and standards.

Like its fellows, this paradigm rests on hidden assumptions that need to be discussed. By positing EU membership as the goal and ideal, the

paradigm scants the period—including the present, of course—when those countries have yet to achieve EU membership. Moreover, this paradigm tends to view genuine political contention with suspicion. Lawmaking loses its role as a channel for resolving conflicts, and becomes just another vehicle for enacting and enforcing EU-compatible standards. Finally, this paradigm views consensus-building as resulting more from externally imposed conditionalities than from domestic dialogue among different interests within a given country. The manner in which the international community has imposed constitutional change in Macedonia is very instructive in this respect. On the one hand, this was a reasonable and necessary change. On the other hand, it had the appearance of an imposition and fed public mistrust in Macedonian institutions and elites.

Our critical reappraisal of these three policy paradigms points to several conclusions. Each has its uses, but they all replace the question of what is actually happening in the region with a set of ready-made answers. The legacy approach overconcentrates on ethnic matters; the transition paradigm is reduced to measuring institutions and institutional performance; and the development-integration paradigm leans too far toward rule by experts. Each paradigm seeks to explain why things are *not* working out as they should (according to that paradigm's ideal), but none seems interested in finding out why things are happening as they are. And none, finally, takes adequately into account the citizen's perspective.

It is time to adopt a perspective that focuses on citizens and treats their experiences as the key to understanding Balkan politics. Democracy, in this view, is less a matter of institutional settings than of the relations between governments and citizens. Democracy means not only that people can vote in free and fair elections, but that they can influence public policy as well. What people think matters at least as much as what governments do.

In order to know what is happening politically in the Balkans, one must ask: What makes individuals and societies feel so insecure? Why are Balkan democracies so corrupt, or perhaps more to the point, why do their citizens think they are? And what are the effects of hard external conditionalities in shaping citizens' loyalty to the democratic regime?

### **The Real Security Threat**

Discussions of security issues in the Balkans usually revolve around five key questions: What status for Kosovo? What future for Macedonia? Will the Dayton accords hold in Bosnia? When can the international forces leave the region? When will Bulgaria and Romania join NATO? But questions about borders, political status, and international guarantees do not exhaust the security concerns of citizens in Balkan countries.

The most likely risk facing the region involves not full-dress warfare but state collapse. State weakness, not armed aggression, is the major security threat today.

September 11 and the global war on terrorism also make imperative a rethinking of Balkan security problems. Is there a danger that parts of the Balkans will become terrorist havens? How much influence does organized crime wield over governments? How should the armed Albanian groups in Macedonia be dealt with?

Only recently has the international community realized how profoundly politics and ethnicity in the region have become entwined with criminality. Armed groups of various kinds, dangerous leftovers from the wars of the post-Yugoslav succession, have proliferated in these mountainous lands. The prolonged UN embargo on Yugoslavia facilitated the establishment of cross-border criminal networks. Channels for smuggling drugs, stolen cars, cigarettes, and people are at the center of the security threats in the Balkans. What we learned after September 11 is that terrorist networks often use smuggling routes and tactics to carry out their activities. Albania (along with Morocco) is considered to be the major conduit through which illegal narcotics reach Western Europe. Local and international publications have documented the ways in which some smuggling operations function as government-run businesses.

Crime lords—often the heads of ethnically based local mafias—are among the Balkans' biggest political donors. The combination of ethnicity and criminality is a critical element in sustaining hostility and accusations of violence against some ethnic groups. Robert Hislope claims that the violence which wracked Macedonia in 2000 can be directly attributed to Albanian criminal groups acting to advance their interests.<sup>6</sup> He sees the combination of Albanian mafias and the corrupt Macedonian state as the major obstacle to the stabilization of the country.

The criminalization of states and of politics makes the international community's task much more difficult. The only way for NATO and the EU to make the region more secure is by policing these countries. Although these two organizations are inexperienced at providing the "soft" security represented by civilian law enforcement and border control, they will have to try. The basic question is whether the EU is ready to create a common police space that includes the Balkans. The answer will depend not on smart bombs but on the capacity to create "smart borders"—frontiers that are open to legitimate trade and travel, but closed to criminals and terrorists.

Recent public opinion polls show alarmingly high rates of perceived insecurity. People feel insecure about their lives, their property, their communities, and their countries. The levels of physical and economic insecurity that people express are similar, whether one is talking about



the former Yugoslavia, Albania, Bulgaria, or Romania. It is the weakness of one's own state and not the aggressive behavior of neighboring countries that is at the center of citizens' concerns. Both individuals and businesses spend vast sums of money on security. They "insure" their cars with mafia-controlled agencies, pay protection money to local gangs, buy electronic alarm systems, and must bribe police officers to get them to do their jobs. The World Bank calculates that 7 percent of business overhead in Albania goes for bribery.<sup>7</sup> Citizens who once suffered from the arbitrary violence of the communist state feel that now their rights are no less threatened by the sheer ineffectiveness and indifference of the weak state.

### **Displacement and Corruption**

Plummeting living standards, mass poverty, high unemployment—none of these are new to observers of the Balkans. What has gone unnoticed, however, is the dramatic rise in the physical and social displacement of huge chunks of society. In fact, Balkan countries are democracies of the displaced. This is obviously true with respect to the war victims in the former Yugoslavia, but it is also true in a broader sense. How many people live now where they lived a decade ago? How many of them work in the same place? How many of them have remained in the same personal and professional circles? Migration to capitals and big cities and emigration to the West are oft-told tales. What remains untold is the destruction of the old professional classes. The loss of status no less than the loss of income determines the hostile attitude that huge groups of people feel toward the new dispensation. Balkan societies are infected with "status panic."

The process of social and physical displacement produces a key distinction between mobile and immobile groups in the populace. The social paralysis and isolation of many citizens, mainly old and disabled people, is among the reasons why support for the reform agenda has collapsed. The destruction of the old middle class is the structural explanation for the rise of political volatility.

Radical and extensive privatization and economic restructuring, however necessary, have led to unprecedented levels of sustained joblessness and systemic impoverishment that have decimated entire sectors of the economy and society. Economic recovery, where it exists, is restricted to big cities, and even there it is patchy. The much-needed overhaul of the social-insurance, pension, and health-care systems has sown enormous personal insecurity, psychological volatility, and lack of confidence in the state's ability to underwrite the conditions of stability and well-being. The state appears to be merely a prize that players try to capture rather than a guarantor of law and the basic services necessary to civilized and decent life. The communist state's ability to provide a degree

of social welfare was crucial to whatever legitimacy it was able to gain for itself. Now that the postcommunist “farewell” state has replaced the communist welfare state, the new democratic regimes naturally suffer from a legitimacy deficit.

Happily, economic decline and rising social inequality have not given a boost to antidemocratic sentiment. On the contrary, Balkan citizens have reacted to economic hardship with demands for more—not less—democracy. Polls reveal popular dissatisfaction with how democratic regimes have performed, but not a longing for nondemocratic alternatives. Balkan capitals are not overrun with protestors, and there are no anti-IMF riots as in Latin America. But the reasons for this patience should not be misread. Balkan citizens forgo protest not because they are happy or for strategic reasons, but because communism destroyed citizens’ capacity for collective action. What public criticism there is tends to focus on corruption. A citizen-focused inquiry must then ask: Why are Balkan politics so corrupt, and why do governments fail to curb corruption?

One possible answer is that epidemic political corruption has to do not so much with communist legacies, postcommunist pathologies, or the quality of the legal environment, but with the sheer increase in the cost of politics. In 1991, parties all over the region had no trouble recruiting enthusiastic young people to put up their posters and hand out their leaflets for free. By decade’s end, with anticommunism and the other sources of ideological controversy having subsided, parties had to start paying to get their message out. Public rallies and other cheap means of political communication became less effective, forcing a shift to expensive media such as television commercials or “friendly coverage” paid for under the table.

The vicious circle of corruption is not hard to trace: Lower public interest means parties must have higher stacks of cash; corruption is a ready source of such cash; higher corruption, in turn, increases public distaste for party politics, making it more costly still as parties are forced to resort to ever more expensive kinds and amounts of advertising to capture the public imagination. The upshot is parties that are increasingly willing to sell their influence over the decision-making process.

In addition to the increases in public disgust and the cost of politics that this cycle fuels, major effects include more individual corruption among people who are drawn to politics by hopes of personal enrichment or come to see little difference between raking in dubious money for their parties and pocketing some of it for themselves. The cycle has also spurred parties to create classes of donors who expect their party’s stint in power to enrich them. The process of privatization in Bulgaria under the UDF became a means for promoting a business class affiliated with that party. The need for money in the context of expensive politics is one of the reasons why governments failed to fight corrup-

tion. The crucial thing to note in all this is that it is not merely the greed of politicians or their allies which causes corruption, but also the lack of a politics where enough is at stake to rouse general citizen interest.

The second reason for governments' inability to convince their citizens that they are fighting corruption has to do with the escalation of anticorruption *perceptions*. Research by the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia shows that anticorruption sentiments in Bulgaria are driven less by actual levels of corruption than by overall disappointment with the results of transition and rising social inequality. Anticorruption rhetoric and sentiments are structurally more important for postcommunist politics than is usually believed. In the absence of a viable alternative to democracy and in the context of the depoliticization of the policy-making process, denunciations of corruption become the only legitimate way to criticize the status quo. Indeed, they provide the only feasible ground for those parties opposed root and branch to the whole ensemble of postcommunist reforms.

In Bulgaria and elsewhere, the corrupt nature of the elite is now taken as a given. Over the last decade, no important politician has been convicted on corruption charges, even though the state prosecutor's office has spent much of that time looking into the one-hundred biggest privatization deals, and most leading political figures are under some sort of investigation. Up until now, none of these investigations has been completed. The evidence winds up not in court but in the media. The result is not the triumph of the rule of law, but a state of total insecurity and the use of the prosecutor's office as an instrument of political pressure.

The widespread perception that everybody and everything in public life is corrupt is the basic danger to Balkan democracies, which are threatened not only by the corrosive effect of local corruption but also by the desire of international organizations to blame corruption for all the failures of the last decade. Richard Rose has shown that what unites those who feel most ready to turn their backs on democracy and look for undemocratic alternatives is not income, party affiliation, or former communist ties, but a conviction that their country is totally corrupt.<sup>8</sup> With this in mind, anticorruption democrats must work not only to reduce corruption but also to make this reduction *visible* to the public. It is difficult to know which of these tasks will be harder to accomplish, but both are necessary.

### The Weak State

The present frustration with democracy in the region cannot be grasped without understanding the current weakness of the state. "Weak state" is a term often used in Balkan discourse. It has always been thought too obvious to require definition. Bad roads, frequent power outages, and the arrival of one's small civil-service salary a year late are all-too-evident

signs that the state is feebler than it was and feebler than it should be. To most analysts, state weakness is like an elephant: You cannot exactly define it, but you are sure that you know it when you see it.

As regards the Balkans today, there are at least three different ways to conceptualize state weakness. The strength of the state can be measured in terms of capabilities. Here, following Joel Migdal, the state's strength is defined as the capability of governments to implement their policy visions, to penetrate society, to regulate, and so on.<sup>9</sup> The strong state can collect taxes while the weak state cannot. It is from this "increasing capabilities" perspective that most leaders in the region see the need to strengthen the state. Yet a state may be good at collecting taxes but terrible at delivering essential public services. So a second measure for assessing the state's strength is how its "consumers" (taxpayers and citizens as recipients of public goods) rate it. Is the state capable of delivering the rule of law? Does it protect human rights, including property rights? A third approach to state weakness defines the weak state as one that has been "captured" by particular interests that dominate policy and tilt the political playing field in their own favor. Russia toward the end of Boris Yeltsin's presidency is a clear example.

Most Balkan states can be described as "weak" in all three of these senses. But state weakness may also be thought of as flowing from strategic behavior by elites who are involved in a predatory project of extracting resources from the state and find themselves constrained by public discontent and political conditionalities.

Some explain postcommunist state weakness as resulting from a neoliberal flirtation with the "striptease state"—the state divested of all superfluous functions. This explains little: Balkan states have never been governed by neoliberal "strippers," but they have nevertheless ended up naked. The origin of the new elites and the things that had to be done to peel the state away from the communist party contributed to state weakness. Yet it is important to emphasize that state weakness is not simply an unintended side-effect of reform, but something that significant portions of the new elites have worked to bring about in their drive to use their positions to extract wealth. When massive amounts of state property are subjected to privatization through a politically controlled process, political power translates into economic power. The structural reason for the growing gap between the public and the elites is that the elites do not need to increase the wealth of the citizens to realize their extraction project. To understand the logic of this process, it helps to think of the postcommunist Balkan lands as something like oil-rich countries, with huge state assets ready for privatization taking the part of crude petroleum ready to be pumped out of the ground. The elite's refusal to take any responsibility for the welfare of the people is at the heart of the crisis of the Balkan democracies.

The paradox of transition is that the reforms must depend for their

success on a stable policy consensus even as these reforms transform and polarize society, producing aloof winners and angry losers. Governments have little room for maneuver. The stability of their policies is ensured largely by outside pressure and constraints in the form of EU or IMF conditionalities, currency pegs, and the like. The international community wants it this way because it remembers the unreliability of Balkan leaders in keeping their commitments: Suffice it to mention the collapse of the Albanian state, the shattering political and economic crisis that gripped Bulgaria in 1997, or the current wranglings between Yugoslavia's President Vojislav Kostunica and his rival, Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić. External constraints are aimed at arresting the extraction project of the elites; unfortunately, these predatory elites have learned to cite such external pressures as excuses for their own refusal to take responsibility for the welfare of ordinary citizens. In this sense, external conditionalities worsen relations between politicians and the public. Governments get elected by making love to the electorate, but they are married to the international donors.

Viewed from below, the Balkan democracies are regimes in which the voters can change governments far more easily than they can change policies. International donors see nothing wrong with parties that win office on a populist ticket but govern on an IMF ticket. The IMF and its fellows call this successful reform and stress its short-term benefits while glossing over its long-term dangers. The recurring failure to translate voter preferences into policy changes can lead to three undesirable developments: 1) It can bring to power an antisystem party such as Vojislav Šešelj's Serbian Radicals or Corneliu Vadim Tudor's Greater Romania; 2) it divorces election campaigning from the actual practice of governance and makes it impossible to hold politicians accountable; and 3) it makes political learning ineffective.

### **The Need for a Return to Politics**

The adoption of a citizen-centered perspective on the state of democracy in the Balkans leads to unexpected conclusions. Most analysts hold that the fragility of democracy in the Balkans is predetermined by two sets of factors, one peculiar to the Balkans, the other peculiar to the postcommunist situation. Balkan factors include the ethnic tensions and historical controversies that impede cooperation as well as the delayed and unfinished process of state formation in the region. Postcommunist factors include the need to democratize the polity while painfully restructuring the economy under conditions of declining living standards and rising material hardships.

These factors matter. But reading the crisis through citizens' eyes suggests that some of the important factors contributing to the uncertain prospects of democracy in the region are related to the worldwide state

of democratic politics these days. The expectation that public discontent with democracy's performance comes from peculiarly regional factors turns out to be false. In its causes and manifestations, the crisis of democratization in the Balkans is not at bottom different from the crisis of democracy elsewhere. What may be different are the consequences. In the Balkans they are likely to be more severe. In 1995, Adam Przeworski predicted that "the combination of an increasing inequality with reduced sovereignty is likely to exacerbate social conflicts and weaken the nascent democratic institutions."<sup>10</sup> This prediction is coming true in the Balkans.

The growing gap that divides publics from elites and the growing mistrust that publics feel toward democratic institutions are the most salient political facts in the Balkans today. The elites think that these facts betoken only a failure to communicate: The reforms are a painful but necessary cure, and a better bedside manner is what is needed. Hence the larger sums that the World Bank and the EU have begun to spend on the task of "communicating reforms." But the present crisis is not a crisis of communication. It is a failure of *representation*.

Voters are in a trap. On the one hand, they want the international community to curb corrupt politicians. On the other hand, voters want a say in making policy. International players delegitimize Balkan democracy by punishing elites who break their promises to the International Monetary Fund, while excusing or even encouraging elites who break promises to voters. Democracy assistance needs a new focus. The goal should be to strengthen real democracy by reconnecting reforms to citizens' actual concerns and regaining people's trust in democratic institutions.

New-model democracy-assistance strategies will result in different policy packages for the different Balkan countries, but each such strategic ensemble must include a rethinking of the following topics:

- the impact that different electoral systems have on links between the representatives and voters, as well as on the latter's chances of promoting policy change. The international community should reconsider its support for proportional representation in the Balkans;
- the dominance currently accorded to expert opinion;
- the international community's hostility toward such tools of popular democracy as local and national referenda. In a situation in which EU integration limits the power of citizens to influence certain policy areas, it is of great importance to turn municipalities into real arenas of genuine politics. Decentralization should be designed and promoted as an instrument for re-politicizing society;
- the need to devise policies to compensate for the democratic deficit created by EU accession;
- the relative paucity of support given to political parties and the work of party reform;
- the view that NGOs and civic activities should be depoliticized.

The only way to reconnect Balkan elites with their publics is a return to real politics, which means airing conflicts openly and peacefully in order to resolve them democratically. Conflicts thus handled are not a sign of democratic weakness but a source of democratic strength. Democracy cannot be grounded on a view of political disputes as something fearsome or distasteful, for without genuine political competition democracy cannot survive in the Balkans.

### NOTES

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1. See Zoltan Barany, "Bulgaria's Royal Elections," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (April 2002): 141–55.

2. *The Unfinished Peace: Report of the International Commission on the Balkans* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1996).

3. Thomas Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (April 2002): 5–21.

4. For an example of this type of analysis, see V.P. Gagnon, Jr., "Serbia's Road to War," *Journal of Democracy* 5 (April 1994): 117–31.

5. The World Bank, "The Road to Stability and Prosperity in South Eastern Europe: A Regional Strategy Paper" (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2000).

6. Robert Hislope, "The Calm before the Storm? The Influence of Cross-Border Networks, Corruption, and Contraband on Macedonian Stability and Regional Security," paper prepared for the 2001 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, Calif., 31 August–2 September 2001.

7. *Albania: A Weak Democracy, a Weak State* (Tirana: Albanian Institute for International Studies, 2002).

8. Richard Rose, William Mishler, and Christian Haerpfer, *Democracy and Its Alternatives: Understanding Post-Communist Societies* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998).

9. Joel Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

10. Adam Przeworski, ed., *Sustainable Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).