

Briefing

Political Trends & Dynamics

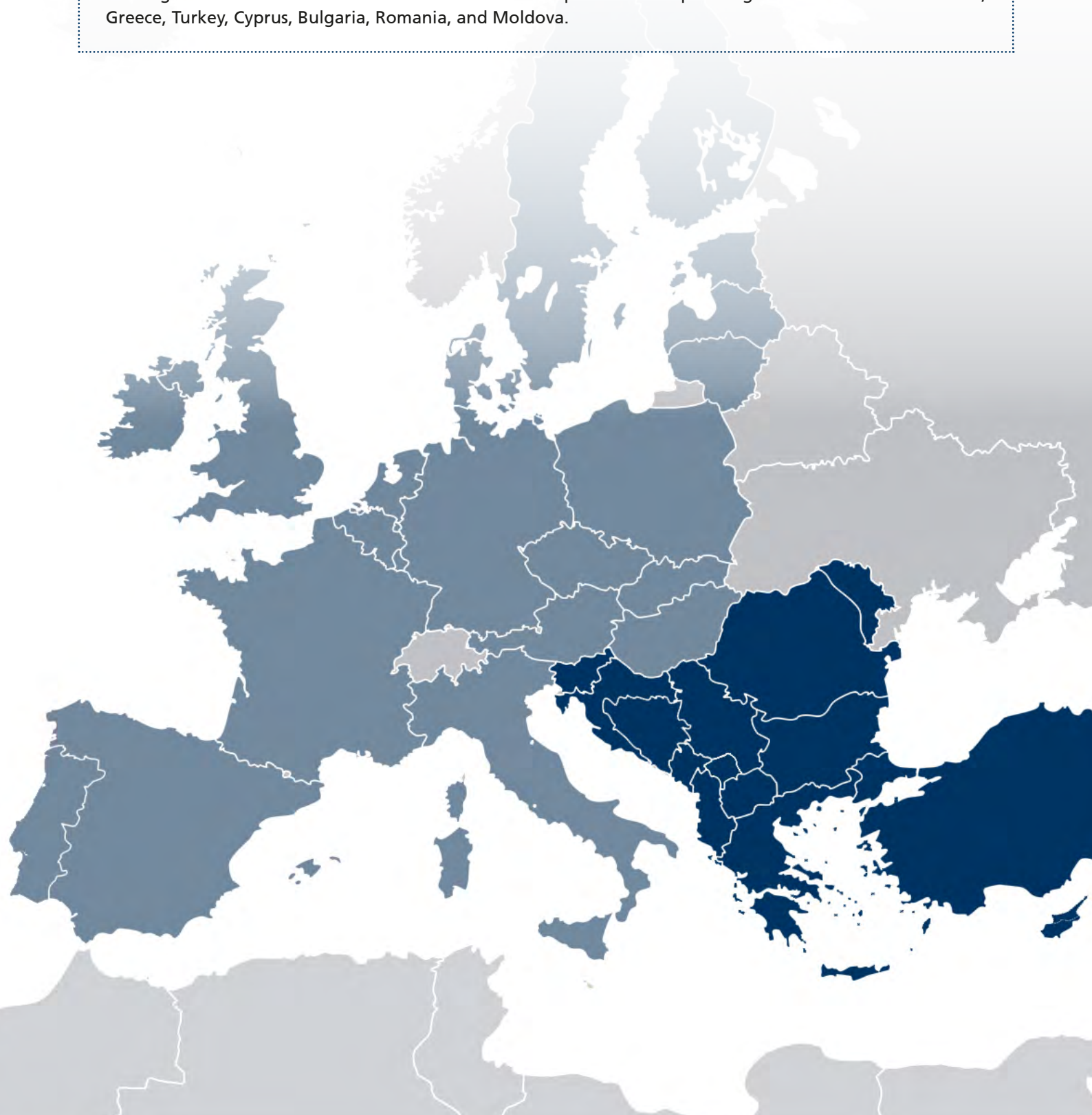
Religion and Secularism in Southeast Europe

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Political Trends & Dynamics in Southeast Europe

A FES DIALOGUE SOUTHEAST EUROPE PROJECT 2016–2018

Peace and stability initiatives represent a decades-long cornerstone of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's work in southeastern Europe. Recent events have only reaffirmed the centrality of Southeast European stability within the broader continental security paradigm. Both democratization and socio-economic justice are intrinsic aspects of a larger progressive peace policy in the region, but so too are consistent threat assessments and efforts to prevent conflict before it erupts. Dialogue SOE aims to broaden the discourse on peace and stability in southeastern Europe and to counter the securitization of prevalent narratives by providing regular analysis that involves a comprehensive understanding of human security, including structural sources of conflict. The briefings cover fourteen countries in southeastern Europe: the seven post-Yugoslav countries and Albania, Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Romania, and Moldova.



Editorial

Jasmin Mujanović & Alida Vračić

Southeastern Europe is a genuine cultural mosaic. Despite the claims of nationalists, no polity in the region is truly homogeneous; ethnic and religious communities intersect and blend together all across the region and have done so for centuries. Even in the wake of the 20th century, one marked in the region by bouts of inter-communal and sectarian strife, the region is still, in many respects, defined by its diversity.

In stark contrast to the Yugoslav regime, which insisted on state-sanctioned secularism, religion today plays a central role in social and political life. Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, and a plethora of folk religious practices have all drawn followers in the region for hundreds of years. Today, these religions continue to be central to the identity and perspective of their respective communities.

Still, these confessional practices, and especially its organized aspects, also have a more sordid dimension. During the Yugoslav Wars, for instance, religious leaders largely became champions of nationalist causes rather than advocates of peace. There were exceptions, of course, but for the most part organized religion played a legitimating rather than adversarial role as far as the region's nationalist turn was concerned. And since then, elements with both the Orthodox and Catholic churches have continued to elevate convicted war criminals as proverbial defenders of the faith. Similar practices have also occurred among Muslim communities in the region.

The end of communism brought the idea of "traditional values" and the "nation" to the fore throughout Southeastern Europe though. Unsurprisingly then, faith groups have emerged, as in other parts of Europe, as key actors in debates over same sex marriage, gender identity, reproductive health, and the role of faith in the public square, especially as relates to education. On the whole, religious groups have taken overwhelmingly conservative, even reactionary, positions on each of these debates. This largely mirrors similar developments in the rest of East and Central Europe, such as Hungary and Poland, where the church has become instrumental in an expansive program of social transformation.

The emerging tendency then, across the region, is the growing clout of religious movements in not only influencing social policy but becoming a fully embedded part of the state apparatus. No longer satisfied with merely being the spiritual shepherds of their respective communities, religious groups increasingly demand sway over matters of government decision-making. Mandatory religious education, for instance, in public schools across Southeastern Europe is now the norm. As is "Christening" of public institutions and commemorations, and an ongoing dialogue between governments and religious leaders on matters of public policy.

In this context, essays in this edition of our Political Trends and Dynamics newsletter take aim at the evolving role of religion in Southeastern Europe. On the whole, it appears as a story of faith as a progenitor and driver of right-wing and conservative politics. But upon closer examination, the process is more complex. Over the last three decades of conflict and transition, religion has emerged as an anchoring force in the lives of millions of people, helping them navigate and even cope with incredible shocks and transformations in their respective societies. Inasmuch as today the role of religion in the region appears more conservative, our collection of essays invite the reader to consider whether something else might be possible. Can religion in Southeastern Europe emerge as a progressive, emancipatory force, one that genuinely afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted? And if not that, can faith still play a constructive role in the region's ongoing political evolution?

Yet Again, the Nationalists and the Church Are Playing Hand in Hand in Croatia, This Time against 'Gender Ideology'

Dr. Antonija Petričušić

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A war on 'gender ideology' is being fought in Croatia. This term has been continuously perpetuated in past months by the Catholic bishops and priest, by conservative religious civil society activists, by right-wing politicians, and by leaders of war veteran organizations. They have managed to introduce this false narrative not only in the public discourse and debates but also in legislation. On March 22nd this year, the center-right coalition led by Croatian Democratic Union's (HDZ) former MEP Andrej Plenković sent a draft law on the ratification of the Council of Europe's *Convention on the Prevention and Fight against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence* along with an interpretative statement to a vote in the Parliament. The statement declares the Convention "is compatible with the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia and that its provisions do not contain the obligation to introduce a gender ideology." Though such an interpretative statement has no effect, it was attached to the text of the Convention in order to mitigate societal tensions regarding the introduction of so-called 'gender ideology' in the legal and educational system. Zagreb Pride, a queer-feminist civil society organization, issued a statement on the occasion of introduction of said interpretative statement, arguing that it "will open the possibility for activists of clerical-right to oppose every attempt of change in social and cultural patterns of behaviour of women and men with the aim of eradicating prejudices, customs, and violence against all women by naming it 'gender ideology'."¹

The government's motion to send a draft law on the ratification of the Convention provoked massive protests against it. A protest, held in Zagreb on Saturday March 24th, gathered a crowd of 5,000 according to the police (though the organizers claimed that it was closer to 70,000). On April 12th, a day before the Parliamentary vote, a second protest was organized in Split, the second-biggest Croatian coastal city which has repeatedly served as a fortress of nationalist mobilisation. Again, an exaggerated number of protesters was reported by the organizers in Split, but it is more likely that 15,000 people gathered. Apart from objecting to the introduction of so-called 'gender ideology' into the Croatian legal and educational system, both protests argued that the ratification would surrender Croatian sovereignty to an expert body overseeing the implementation of the Convention. The protest, however, had another objective: to openly provoke the Prime Ministers' position within his own political party. The mobilization against 'gender ideology' was instigated back in late 2017 by the Bishop's Conference, who argued that the content of the Convention forced gender ideology on other state policies and opposes 'natural law', traditional gender roles, and the tradition of the Croatian nation. The right-wing politicians and their war veteran supporters also claimed that the ratification would be a betrayal of the glorious Croatian recent past in which soldiers lost their lives for Croatian independence.

The Convention was eventually ratified by the Parliament on April 13th by a vast majority of votes. However, part of the governing party, which form a parliamentary majority, stood against it. Fourteen MPs from the governing HDZ rejected backing the ratification, demonstrating the Prime Minister Plenković does not enjoy the support of the rightist fraction of the party he has presided over since July 2016. Back in 2013, the former social-liberal government signed the so-called Istanbul Convention, named after the city in which it was promulgated in 2011. The aim of the Convention is to enhance the protection of women and children from gender-based violence. However, the Parliament at that time failed to ratify it immediately, since this instrument of international law would require the assurance of significant financial resources for currently underfunded projects for the protection of victims of domestic violence. Although President Kolinda Grabar Kitarović, of the HDZ, invoked the ratification of the Convention in her pre-electoral campaign in 2014, and though the delay in ratification served as fodder for the centre-right politicians to accuse the incumbents of inadequate protection of women in the elec-

¹ http://www.zagreb-pride.net/new/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Zagreb-Pride_With-the-Istanbul-Convention-we-Have-Been-Served-Transphobia-and-Homophobia-1.pdf.

toral debates preceding the September 2016 parliamentary elections, the right-wing and conservative actors have now deployed the narrative of the threatening 'gender ideology' within the Convention and have formed a new political cleavage around it.

Moral Crusaders who Fight Modernisation

The rise of conservative identities and religious values, a trend that can be traced in a number of Central European countries nowadays, can be followed through several avenues in Croatia. One is through the influence of the Catholic Church in all areas of life (media and education particularly) and above all through its influence on politics. The Bishops provide their opinions and advice and weigh in on societal and political debates, and tolerate when clergy outwardly advocate for certain political options in advance to the elections. For example, the Bishops issued a statement on the ratification of the Convention inviting members of the Parliament to vote against its ratification. They claimed that "to vote for the Convention would mean, among other things, to open the door to something contrary to human creation, to the natural law and fundamental values of the Christian faith and culture, and to what we consider to be destructive for families, for the demographic renewal of a nation and for the upbringing of new generations."²

The second evidence of rising religious fundamentalism is confirmed by the growing influence of lay Catholic organizations in shaping both societal discourse and influencing the political debates and policy processes. In the course of the last decade, a proliferation of conservative civil society organizations and their involvement in the civil society scene has reshaped civil society, which heretofore been dominated by liberal actors since its inception in the early 1990s after the country declared independence from Yugoslavia. Those organizations focus on changing the legal and political system by evoking national referenda that would change the text of the Constitution and other laws. The legitimising argument these organizations deploy is that they represent values of Catholics, who make up 86.2 % of the country's population, and that those values should be reflected in all spheres of social life. Their agenda, so far, had revealed their intentions to affirm heterosexual marriage and prevent the legalisation of same-sex marriage, to restrict abortion legislation, to prevent the introduction of the sex education in schools, to reform (surprisingly) the electoral process by introducing a preferential voting mechanism, and to restrict the current rights which national minorities have to political participation in the Parliament.

After the conservative organizations who composed the initiative 'In the Name of the Family' succeeded in spurring the 2013 national referendum, which introduced a redefinition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman, and created a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage, the institution of the referendum appears to be a measure of assuring popular legitimacy. The provision in referendum legislation that legitimizes a simple majority of votes to introduce amendments to the Constitution, has led to the proliferation of referenda initiatives, particularly among conservatives who are able to assure financial resources necessary for the organization of the collection of 10% of voters' signatures needed to spark a referendum.

In two weeks of May 2018, conservative civil society organizations were collecting supporting signatures for two parallel referendum initiatives. One, called 'The Truth about the Istanbul Convention', asked to repeal the Istanbul Convention by forcing the Croatian Parliament to withdraw from this international treaty. The second one, called 'The People Decide', aims at reforming the electoral system and restricting the mandate of national minority parliamentary representatives. The later initiative justified its inception by arguing that they were disappointed that the elected representatives in the Parliament did not take into account the will of the voters who are against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Though the referenda questions seem not to be fully understood by many citizens, in a time of deep distrust in politics due to immanent political corruption, it is likely those initiatives will indeed collect the requisite 380,000 supporting signatures from citizens who believe their political elites are not representing their needs and interest.

2 <http://www.hbk.hr/?type=vijest&ID=689>.

Interview

Josip Juratović

Member of the Bundestag, Commissioner for Integration of the SPD Parliamentary Group

FES: Can you comment on the ever-growing influence of religion and religious institutions in the region, and what that means for ordinary people?

Juratović: The enormous influence of religion with which we've been confronted in the past few decades in the Balkans – and especially in some countries in the Western Balkans – reveals the weakness of political structures and their inability to solve social problems with constructive politics. Given the lack of solutions, the only tool that remains in the hands of, say, the political elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina is religion. Unresolved ethnic and religious issues are constantly advanced as the most important topics, instead of crucial problems such as high unemployment, unbridled corruption, poverty, and threats to basic human rights. The silence of religious communities in pre-election times and deference to corrupt political elites, silence about crimes from one's own people, the construction of religious buildings – not only due to faith but in order to signal to the 'other' that they are unwelcome in this entity – all point to the fact that in BiH, religion has betrayed faith several times over. It also tells us that religious institutions have found their earthly gods, the parties they worship, where national interest supersedes the religious and is above human rights – thereby depriving others of their basic human rights as well as their freedom of religion. Certainly, both sides have their particularities as well as admirable exceptions which should be recognized and supported.

FES: Is this trend something which is much bigger than the region, something which we see even in more developed societies, or is it something else?

Juratović: This policy of religious conflict in the region has lasted almost 30 years and is one of the main smokescreens for hiding the incompetence of politics – it is not a trend at all but a chronic illness of this society. What is clear is that in Bosnia in particular, there was never conflict between true believers who live by their faith, and these people would never make trouble for each other. Just like in culture, sport, and science, true religion binds people together and accepts difference and respects others. On the other hand, those who are not genuine believers in BiH do all they can to destroy the coexistence of the three peoples and show that the only way that they can be the guarantors of stability is to stoke fears about those who are different. If it continues, this abuse of religion by the political abuse will bring Bosnia to the brink.

FES: If there are no big changes, especially in the political scene, what are your projections for the region? Will it be possible to remove state institutions from the influence of religion, and what, finally, would that mean?

Juratović: Changes in BiH are essential and it's time that political actors come to power who are innocent of corruption and the war crimes of the 1990s, and who don't manipulate religious beliefs to stay in power. In order for Bosnian society to progress, religion must be an ethical corrective which counterbalances blatant disregard for others – something which we've seen too much of in the ruling class of Bosnia. People have replaced the ideologies of the past system with religious institutions because they need support. Religion often plays this role when institutions fail. This is why it's essential for religious institutions to do the work they're meant to do as well as to develop democratic values, independent media, and human rights, and have a greater engagement in creating an inclusive society for everyone in order to find the right solution for the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the whole region.

Churches and Religious Communities as Free Spaces

Commentary by Dr. Karsten Dümmel

Resident Representative, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Bosnia and Herzegovina

Churches, as organizations, do not exist in Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are, however, religious communities, and there is the individual believer. There are ministers, priests, imams, and rabbis that remain open to or closed towards other religious communities as well as ethnoreligious nationalisms in the Bosnian and Herzegovinian society.

A study on religion and reconciliation conducted at the University of Edinburgh in 2013¹ came to an astonishing conclusion: namely, that “religious people” rather than organized religious communities are the largest carriers of hope in Bosnia and Herzegovina’s reconciliation process. 72 % of respondents, who consider themselves as ‘religious’ are more optimistic towards the reconciliation process than the ‘non-religious’. Paradoxically, respondents remain hopeful that their own religious community would carry the process forward whilst taking a critical and distanced stance towards their own religious leaders.

The day-to-day work on themes of interreligious dialogue and reconciliation (of which there are about 40–70 events yearly) confirms these results. For example, the Catholic Faculty in Sarajevo openly discusses topics that are taboo in public settings. Together with students and professors of the Orthodox Faculty, the Islamic Community, Protestants, and the Jewish community they talk about issues such as war crimes, mass rape as a weapon of war, concentration camps during the war, and the pursuit of religion in times of totalitarianism and nationalism. Various experts and lecturers are invited to controversially discuss these issues, sometimes complementing each other and sometimes disagreeing.

In Bosnia, the Interreligious Council Sarajevo plays a crucial role in mediation and reconciliation. For a while now, there are several initiatives in the country, such as the religious Peace Center in Sanski Most, NGOs such as “Small Steps” or “Forgotten Children”, and informal interreligious working groups in Mostar and Sanski Most, who use existing synergies or create new ones. These initiatives include an overarching curriculum between the Catholic, Orthodox, and Islamic faculties as well as the Peace Center’s work with veterans’ associations of all armies formerly involved in the war as well as talks with veterans at universities and schools in the country. Highlights of such activities are the “Young Theologists Meetings” summer schools, which gather students from the region and all religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina for ten days and have them work together. These summer schools visit cultural and religious sites, but also sites of the worst war crimes. Other actors and representatives from religious communities also participated in meetings in Hamburg and Berlin as part of a network initiative, to talk about the *Church Under One Roof* as a site of exchange among religions and cultures.

Cases of disagreement and arguments between religious decision-makers in Bosnia and Herzegovina (such as the ICTY’s verdict against six high ranking Bosnian Croat Officers for war crimes, or the participation of Orthodox dignitaries for the January 9th festivities in Banja Luka [a national holiday in Republika Srpska, forbidden by Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Constitutional Court]) reoccur mostly in a direct political context. It is often the individual actors of the Interreligious Councils and the various faculties and religious communities who ensure that dialogue and reconciliation efforts are maintained – it is the individual within the community who counts.

¹ Wilkes, Georges R. et al. (2013): *Factors in Reconciliation: Religion, Local Conditions and Trust. Results from a Survey Conducted in 13 Cities Across Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Sarajevo, p. 11.

The background of the entire page is a blue-tinted photograph. It shows a concrete wall with a dove in flight, its wings spread, as if carrying a message of peace. In the foreground, a peace flag with a dove and a banner is visible, partially obscured by the text. The overall mood is one of hope and stability.

POLITICAL TRENDS & DYNAMICS

OVERVIEW

THE AIM OF THIS SECTION IS TO BROADEN THE DISCOURSE ON PEACE AND STABILITY IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE AND TO PROVIDE ANALYSIS THAT INVOLVES A COMPREHENSIVE UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN SECURITY, INCLUDING STRUCTURAL SOURCES OF CONFLICT. THE BRIEFINGS COVER FOURTEEN COUNTRIES IN SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE: THE SEVEN POST-YUGOSLAV COUNTRIES AND ALBANIA, GREECE, TURKEY, CYPRUS, BULGARIA, ROMANIA, AND MOLDOVA.

NATIONALISM, RELIGION, AND SECULARISM

Nationalist themes once again dominated events within the region, intermingled with the interventions of religious leaders in daily politics and the usual debates of what role these same leaders should have in public life. The interplay of right-wing nationalism and religious conservatism could perhaps most clearly be seen on the terrain of values, where they often most easily overlap. After Bulgaria and Slovakia decided to hold off from ratifying the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women, the bitterly divisive debate over this Council of Europe convention reached **Croatia**. With the Croatian Parliament due to ratify the convention in April, right-wing opposition groups and the Catholic Church expressed vocal opposition and mounted protests to what they saw as attempts to introduce 'gender ideology' by the back door. The ratification of the convention also triggered divisions within the ruling HDZ. Analysts warned that failure to ratify the Convention could even lead to the fall of the government of Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic. Ultimately, the Convention was adopted in the Croatian Parliament, in part thanks to the support of opposition MPs. However, right-wing groups, backed by some members of the Catholic clergy, are collecting signatures for a referendum on the Convention.

In neighbouring **Serbia**, the nexus between nationalism and religion manifested itself less in the arena of (disputed) values and more firmly on issues of national identity and sovereignty. Gathering for their annual Holy Council, the bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church issued a firmly worded statement on the issue of Kosovo. In the statement, the bishops very clearly called on the Serbian Government not to recognize Kosovo, nor agree to any exchange of territories. Individual bishops also expressed sharp criticisms aimed at the Serbian leadership over their handling of Kosovo.

Such interventions in Serbia, Croatia and elsewhere in the region inevitably poured fuel onto fire of the low-burning debates on **what kind of role religious groups should have in public life**. These, in turn, exposed sharply differing interpretations of the notion of secularism, ranging from those who dispute the right of religious or-

ganizations to comment on political matters to those who would give them a stronger say in social and stately affairs.

A dispute involving the **Orthodox Churches of Bulgaria and Serbia**, as well as the unrecognized Macedonian Orthodox Church, also briefly captured the attention of the public in these three countries. Indeed, a bitter split between the Bulgarian and Serbian Orthodox Churches, sparked by the possibility of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church taking over patronage of the unrecognized Macedonian Orthodox Church, was narrowly avoided when the bishops of the Bulgarian Church decided not to attend a celebration being hosted by the their Macedonian counterparts. The dispute stems from the decision of the Macedonian Orthodox bishops and clergy to unilaterally break away from the Serbian Orthodox Church in the 1960s, resulting in the failure of other Orthodox Churches to recognize the move.

Meanwhile, a much more nationalist dispute engulfed relations between **Belgrade and Zagreb** in late April. On April 18, a delegation of Croatian MPs abruptly terminated their visit to Serbia after ultranationalist Serbian politician Vojislav Seselj insulted them and trampled the Croatian flag in the Serbian Parliament. Several days later, Serbia's notorious Defence Minister, Aleksandar Vulin, earned himself a ban from entering Croatia by stating, provocatively, that only the Supreme Commander of the Serbian Army (Aleksandar Vucic) could decide on whether he would visit the Jasenovac concentration camp commemoration in Croatia. Not surprisingly, the Croatian government decided to demonstrate that only they could, in fact, decide on this by banning Vulin from entering Croatia. The Serbian government responded by banning the Croatian Defence Minister, Damir Krsticevic, from entering Serbia. A wider tit-for-tat diplomatic war was only narrowly avoided. To most observers, the whole saga appeared like yet another orchestrated attempt by both Belgrade and Zagreb to flex their nationalist muscles at the expense of their bilateral relations.

ELECTIONS

Turkey is set to hold key presidential and parliamentary elections on June 24th, after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called snap elections in

mid-April. Having somewhat wrong-footed his opponents, Erdogan and the AKP are expected to secure a victory in the elections. The real debate seems to be not whether Erdogan will be re-elected president, but whether he will win in the first or second round. Similarly, his AKP seems set to win the Parliamentary elections, the only question being whether it will secure an outright majority or not. During the course of May, the Turkish elections came very close to home in the Balkans. Having been denied the right to do so in a number of EU countries, Erdogan decided to hold a huge rally in the Bosnian capital Sarajevo, which sparked negative reactions both in the region and in Western media.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan attends the 6th general assembly of the Union of European Turkish Democrats (UETD) in Sarajevo



Veteran **Montenegrin** leader Milo Djukanovic successfully staged another political comeback when, on May 15th, he successfully secured election to the post of President of Montenegro. This will be Djukanovic's eight term in office as either Prime Minister or President of the small Balkan state. It will also make Djukanovic the longest serving leader in Europe. Having won an impressive first-round victory in the elections with around 54 % of the votes cast, Djukanovic and the DPS passed another test on May 27th, when they came out on top of local elections held across much of Montenegro.

Despite the fact that the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) won a convincing victory in the **Belgrade** City elections back on March 4th, the Serbian capital still awaits to see who its chosen

Mayor will be for the next four years. The ruling SNS must decide on someone by June 9th. Meanwhile, in **Bosnia** there were no signs of progress in resolving the problems with the election law which threaten to prevent the formation of governments in the Federation and at the central state level following October's national elections.

SHAKY GOVERNMENTS

Minor wobbles were visible in a number of Balkan governments over the last two months. In **Macedonia**, the government of Zoran Zaev successfully navigated its way through a vote of confidence on April 12th, filed by the opposition VMRO-DPMNE. All in all, the Zaev government seems to have emerged from this test stronger – two small Albanian parties appear set to join the government as part of a cabinet reshuffle, increasing the government's slim majority in Parliament.

Croatian Economy Minister Martina Dalic resigned on May 14th



Meanwhile, in **Croatia** the government of Andrej Plenkovic continued to be tested politically. On April 13th, a no-confidence motion against Deputy Prime Minister Martina Dalic – tabled by the opposition over her handling of the Agrokor company's restructuring, as well as accusations of nepotism in relation to this – was defeated in the Croatian Parliament. Yet the accusations continued to linger. Finally, on May 14th, Dalic resigned following the leaking of private emails which again suggested that she had helped acquaintances to benefit from the state-backed

restructuring of the Agrokor retailer and food giant. Dalic maintained that she had not done anything wrong, but declared that she “did not want to be a burden” on the government.

After prolonged speculation that he would take the plunge and abandon the **Serbian** government, Finance Minister Dusan Vujovic announced that he was resigning on May 7th for personal and professional reasons. Although long rumored and not necessarily a surprise, the resignation still caused a significant amount of uncertainty and nervousness as Vujovic was seen as a guarantor that the government would continue pursuing fiscally responsible policies and wider structural reforms. His departure, together with speculation that he could be replaced by outgoing Belgrade mayor Sinisa Mali, created fears that the government might choose to increase public expenditure and pursue a more populist spending course. A wider cabinet reshuffle is expected during the course of the next few months, although the government remains stable.

WITH BEST WISHES

The much heralded **EU-Western Balkans Sofia Summit** came and went, yet in its aftermath, there was a sense that it had failed to meet the (perhaps over-inflated) expectations which had been generated. Pitched as a summit to ‘re-boot’ the enlargement process of the Western Balkans, it ultimately boiled down to another case of just keeping the promise of enlargement alive. European leaders talked of ‘connectivity’ and support for the region’s infrastructure projects while official statements appeared much less committed than what was said in Thessaloniki fifteen years ago. Some observers in the region noted that ‘connectivity’ seemed to be the latest in a never-ending string of jargon invented by the EU as a substitute for genuine progress on the enlargement agenda.

As the first Western Balkans Summit outside the framework of the Berlin Process in a while, the meeting, which was preceded by several visits to the region, played an important role in the European Commission’s communication strategy. Ultimately, the real message from Sofia howev-

er was that a great deal more work needed to be done before enlargement could be expected to happen – both in terms of reforming the EU from within and reforming the Balkan candidate countries. Particularly disappointed were regional leaders such as Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, who has been lobbying hard for accession negotiations to be opened with his country but, seemingly, to no avail. Internal EU differences were also visible, not least when it came to Spain, which largely boycotted the Summit due to its own Catalonia-inspired sensitivities to the presence of Kosovo’s officials in Sofia.

Boyko Borisov, Donald Tusk and Jean-Claude Juncker attend the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia on May 17th



SECURITY

Security-related issues appeared to take an unusually prominent place in the headlines over the last two months. A number of terrorism-related cases were reported in the local media. On May 18th, a court in **Pristina** sentenced eight Kosovars to a total of 35.5 years in prison for plotting a terrorist attack against an Israeli football team in November 2016. The group is accused of plotting to blow up the Israeli team during a visit to Elbasan in Albania, as well as terrorist activities in Kosovo itself. According to the Court, the men were being coordinated by two key ISIS commanders from Kosovo, Lavdim Muhaxheri (since killed) and Ridvan Haqifi. In **Bosnia**, authorities carried out two separate raids in the capital Sarajevo in early April, during which weapons, bombs, ammunition, knives and flags of the Islamic State were seized.

Meanwhile, in neighbouring **Montenegro**, the Special Prosecution for Organized Crime opened several investigations into individuals suspected of having fought for ISIS in Syria or having acted as recruiters for the organization. In Serbia, the High Court handed down jail sentences to seven individuals for links to jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq, as well as plotting acts of terrorism. In a slightly unusual twist, a court in **Moscow** sentenced a group of Islamist extremists with ISIS links – among them a Moldovan citizen – found to have plotted terrorist attacks in 2016, to 18 years in prison in mid-May.

Kosovo media reported during the second half of May that the government in Pristina was working on a new, long-term plan for transforming the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) into a regular army. Previous attempts by the authorities in Pristina to push through such a change have been thwarted by both opposition from the international community and Kosovo's own legal framework, which requires a double majority – two thirds of MPs in Parliament as well as a two thirds majority among the MPs representing Kosovo's non-Albanian ethnic minorities – to adopt such changes. Given firm opposition by ethnic Serb MPs to such a change, the adoption of the necessary constitutional amendments seems unlikely in the near future. Meanwhile, a draft of **Serbia's** new National Security Strategy listed Kosovo as one of the main security challenges for Serbia in the region.

Finally, in Montenegro there are increasing concerns about organized crime and the public security risks which it poses. In April, yet another bomb explosion occurred, this time in the northern town of Bijelo Polje. The seventh such incident this year is part of an ongoing violent feud between rival gangs thought to be involved in cocaine smuggling. Having insisted that the security situation in the country is stable, Montenegrin officials are now conceding that there is a growing problem as public dissatisfaction risks boiling over.

MIGRANTS

Having kept a low profile in the media for much of the past year, the issue of migrants from various corners of the Middle-East passing through

the Western Balkans en route to the European Union has once again become present in the regional media.

Refugees in central Sarajevo



This time, **Bosnia** has found itself in the focus of such reports, as growing numbers of migrants attempt to reach EU member state Croatia via its long (and mountainous) border with Bosnia. Until recently, Bosnia had largely remained beyond other well-trodden migrant paths, which ran primarily through Macedonia, Serbia, and onwards through Hungary and Croatia. Now, the country finds itself facing an increasing build-up of migrants within its borders, all looking for an opportunity to cross into Croatia. Yet even the presence of relatively modest numbers of migrants is putting a serious strain on Bosnia's fragile government(s). Milorad Dodik, the President of the Republika Srpska entity, openly declared that migrants were not welcome in this corner of the country.

A refugee child near tents in central Sarajevo



Meanwhile, an attempt by the central government to move migrants from public spaces in the capital Sarajevo to an asylum centre near the south-western town of Mostar was nearly thwarted as cantonal police in the region blocked buses transporting the migrants from Sarajevo in a dramatic standoff which lasted for several hours. Bosnian Security Minister Dragan Mektic went so far as to accuse the local police forces of staging a 'virtual coup'. The whole episode exposed the fragility and disfunctionality of Bosnia's state institutions, posing the inevitable question of how Bosnia would deal with an even bigger wave of migrants that appears to be on its way.

POLITICAL CORRUPTION AND THE RULE OF LAW

A string of stories relating to the nexus between politics, corruption and organized crime, along with the usual rule of law issues, have also been very visible in the media.

Albania was engulfed in a bitter exchange of accusations and counter accusations over the involvement of individuals tied to senior politicians in drug dealing in early May. Having hurled various accusations relating to drugs and crime at Interior Minister Fatmir Xhafaj, Albania's main opposition Democratic Party (DP) followed up these accusations by publishing what it claims is an intercepted phone call involving Xhafaj's brother, Agron, which, the DP claims, shows that Agron Xhafaj is still in the drugs business. Previously, the DP had also published an Italian Court verdict from 2012, which showed that Agron Xhafaj had been sentenced to seven years in prison for drug dealing. Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama accused the opposition of fabricating the intercepted phone calls in order to sabotage the government's attempts to secure the opening of EU accession negotiations.

Shortly before this, former Minister of Interior Saimir Tahiri, also from the Socialist Party, quit his Parliamentary seat in order to, as he put it, face investigations and demands for his arrest by prosecutors as a common member of the public. Albanian prosecutors have opened investigations into Tahiri's alleged involvement in drug smuggling and even requested permission

to arrest him in late 2017, something that was rejected by the ruling Socialist majority, which claimed the investigation was politically motivated. Tahiri's resignation comes after what appear to have been some tough questions directed at Rama in relation to the Tahiri investigation during a visit to Germany, during which Rama campaigned for the opening of Albania's EU accession negotiations.

Meanwhile, a veteran **Bosnian** politician had better 'luck'. Fahrudin Radoncic, the leader of the Alliance for a Better Future for Bosnia party, was acquitted by a court in Sarajevo of charges of obstructing justice. Radoncic had been accused of involvement in pressuring witnesses in the drug-trafficking trial of Nasser Kelmendi in Kosovo. Equally 'lucky' was former **Romanian** Prime Minister Viktor Ponta – Romania's Supreme Court acquitted him of corruption charges in May, having previously postponed the verdict a whole five times.

In a rare piece of good news from the region for high-level political corruption investigations, it appears that the **Macedonian** Special Prosecution's (SJO) mandate to carry out high-level investigations would be extended. Officials of the Ministry of Justice announced in May that the SJO would be transformed into a special department within the Public Prosecution service. News coming out of the rest of the region was less encouraging. Experts from the Council of Europe warned in April that legal reforms adopted by the Romanian Parliament in December, in the face of bitter criticisms from the opposition and much of the public, threatened judicial independence in the country. None of this deterred the ruling Social Democrat-led government from adopting further controversial changes to legislation relating to the country's magistrates at the end of the same month. For the time being, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis has refused to sign the legislation, declaring that he would refer them to the country's Constitutional Court instead.

BILATERAL DISPUTES

Greece and Macedonia appear to be inching ever closer to a resolution of their bilateral dispute regarding Macedonia's name. Increasing-

ly positive signals are emerging that the two sides may have agreed on a compromise solution to the country's name – the term 'Republic of Ilinden Macedonia' appears to be the solution now acceptable to the governments of both countries. It remains to be seen whether the term would only be used in bilateral relations between Greece and Macedonia or more widely, as well as what formula would be found for defining the national identity and language of Macedonia(ns).

A détente of sorts may be in the air in relations between **Moscow and Podgorica**. In early May, current Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic made overtures aimed at improving relations between his country and Russia. The move was cautiously welcomed in Moscow, but some observers argued that Djukanovic was more interested in a superficial thawing of relations aimed at encouraging Russian tourists to visit Montenegro ahead of the summer holiday season rather than a real rapprochement.

No further progress could be observed in relations between **Belgrade and Pristina**, which remain in deep-freeze following the brutal arrest and expulsion of Marko Djuric, Serbia's chief negotiator with Pristina from north Kosovo in late March. Despite this, Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic appears to be ramping up his rhetoric on the need for 'painful compromises' on the part of all sides (particularly Serbia) when it comes to their mutual relations. Many observers believe that Vucic is coming under ever greater international pressure to deliver on promises to reach a legally binding framework regarding relations between Serbia and Kosovo.

The Relationship between Religious Communities and the State

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One of the peculiar aspects of the transitional context of European post-socialist countries is the relationship between religious communities and politics. In fact, numerous scholars emphasize that very nexus (between religion and politics) as a key social determinant of the process of transition. Since the 1990s, the nationalist discourse in the former Yugoslavia republics has been expressed more in ethno-religious rather than democratic-political terms. In newly created states, the dominant religious communities have come to be seen as the guardians of national heritage and values, providing institutional, ideological and symbolic support to new ethnopolitical elites.

As I have argued elsewhere, the early post-socialist period in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has been characterized by two powerful and related processes: a 'nationalization of the sacral' and a 'sacralization of the national'.¹ In other words, ethnonational political ideologies have demanded (and have been granted) the support of organized religious institutions in order to legitimize new political establishments. There have been no exceptions within the three major religious communities (the Islamic Community, the Catholic Church, and the Serbian Orthodox Church).

There are several reasons for this development, but two reasons have been ideologically and historically essential. First, during the so-called socialist period of 1946–1990, the religious communities presented themselves as the only considerably-sized source of counterculture that had a significant influence in every social stratum. The second reason has to do with the process of ethnonational differentiation between the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina. That is, religious identities have become a crucial mode of identifying difference between citizens, and the majority of people consider religion as the ultimate marker of Self-Other dichotomy, and therefore crucial for the structuring of individual and collective consciousness.

Religion in BiH is not confined to religious leaders or official expressions, but is also manifested in local traditions and customs, family rituals, practical rites, private narratives, and personal affiliations to (religious) communities, with or without specific doctrinal knowledge. Nonetheless, religion is always a social phenomenon, and it manifests at various levels: on the individual level – as spirituality, a matter of personal identity, and worldview; on the collective level – as a faith-based community, with its doctrinal teachings, moral norms, symbols, rituals, practices; and on the level of institutions – as relevant bodies which include leadership and a specific type of hierarchy.

However, after the collapse of socialism, religion was revitalized, and it came to be understood as a political fact – religion was politicized through ethnicization. As this occurred, the 'understanding' of religion has, unfortunately, narrowed: religion has been oriented and reduced to ethnicity, rather than to its immanent universal characteristics, features, and mission. Thus ethnic and religious identities collapsed into each other. Ethnic identities are now defined exclusively by religious belonging – perhaps because this was one of the only ways to differentiate the populace of BiH from one another.

Accordingly, in the last two and a half decades in Bosnia and Herzegovina, religious renewal and the revitalization of religion is, above all, present as a de-secularization of public space and life. All relevant indicators point toward a significant revitalization of the position and role of religion in the society of Bosnia and Herzegovina: increased participation in religious activities, the underlining of religious affiliation, the presence of religious communities in political and public life as well as in media, the role of religious communities the legal system, the education system, etc.

¹ See Genevieve Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland*, 2006.

As of today, the churches and religious communities have the status of legal persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The *Law on Freedom of Religion* (2004) confirms the continuity of legal personality of historically based churches and religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina which include the Islamic Community of BiH, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, and the Jewish Community of BiH.

A comprehensive discussion of the role of religion—and in particular of secularization and state-faith relations — in contemporary societies lies beyond the scope of this article, but it is worth noting that the secularization process should be seen as a transformation of the role of religion, rather than as a sign of its decline. Charles Taylor is right when he argues that “religion’s place in the public sphere should not be taken as a ‘special case,’” even though, for a range of historical reasons, it has come to be seen as such (e.g. in Bosnia and Herzegovina).² Further, I would echo other scholars in suggesting that secularization not only protects the inalienable right of individual conscience, but it is also a way of life with the post-modern return of religion in the most democratic fashion.

Therefore, the question should not be to what extent “secularization” is oppositional or anti-religious, but rather, how secularization is a political commitment that grows out of the realities of living in the multi-religious societies (e.g. Bosnia and Herzegovina).

Accordingly, a report by the European Commission Community Research Reflection Group on “The Spiritual and Cultural Dimensions of Europe” (2014) concluded that even in Europe, where modernization and secularization appear to go hand in hand, public life without religion is inconceivable.³ It argues that:

“the community-fostering power of Europe’s religious faiths should be supported and deployed on behalf of the cohesion of the new Europe. The risks involved, however, should not be overlooked. These include a possible invasion of the public sphere by religious institutions, as well as the threat that religion may be used to justify ethnic conflicts. It must be remembered that many apparent religious conflicts have political or social causes, and that they may be solved by social measures before they become religiously charged.”

The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina is more than a good example.

Be that as it may, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a concordat with the Holy See recognizes the public juridical personality of the Catholic Church and grants a number of rights, including to forming educational and charitable institutions, carrying out religious education, and official recognition of Catholic holidays. A similar agreement exists with the Serbian Orthodox Church. Following the Treaties with the Holy See (the Catholic Church) and the Serbian Orthodox Church, the State should therefore conclude similar treaties with the other two religious communities: the Islamic and the Jewish Community respectively.

When it comes to the commitment to religious accommodation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the introduction of the so-called French model of *laïcité* (division of church and state) would be in concordance with the experience of the Bosnian population under the former socialist government. However, the ethnoreligious nationalism which is in place in Bosnian politics today makes the introduction of this model of state secularism very unlikely. At the same time, the “territorial compartmentalization” of freedom of religion leads to discrimination against ‘others’ in all spheres of life because of omnipresent political pressure, which is based on the symbiosis of dominant political parties and religions and their leaders. To make one’s own choice to accept the “ethnoreligious” ascription by others or to become suspect of being a ‘traitor’ of one’s own faith violates the normative standards of freedom of conscience, religion, and belief.

² http://www.roeduseis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Judith_Butler_J%C3%BCrgen_Habermas_Charles_Taylor_BookZZ.org_.pdf.

³ https://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/pdf/other_pubs/michalski_091104_report_annexes_en.pdf.

The most important requirement for the possibility of introduction of religious accommodation as an effective majority/minority protection is thus the disentanglement of territory and ethnoreligious identity by establishing institutional ways and means of "cultural autonomy" in the sphere of education, media and other areas which communities and their leaders deem important for the preservation of their cultural identities.

The BiH institutions and political decision-making bodies must be reformed in such a way as to find a middle ground between French *laïcité* and ethnoreligious nationalisms which would allow for full and effective freedom of belief in the private sphere as well as for multi-religious pluralism in the public sphere based on a concept and model of "positive" equality to be guaranteed by state authorities.

Political Islam's Endgame in Turkey?

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The success of religiously inspired political movements rests on two fundamental misconceptions. The first pertains to those in the general public who see parties like the AKP (Justice and Development Party) as outsiders and assume that politicians claiming religiously grounded ethical principles will act accordingly and hence be less corrupt and greedy when compared with their secular counterparts. The second, and more momentous misconception concerns the insiders, i.e. the followers of religiously motivated movements like the AKP. Rooted as they are in the social milieu and practice of their community, they eventually come to believe that they are ethical beings by grace of membership in their community. This is precisely what has happened with the AKP and its chairperson and current President of Turkey, Tayyip Erdoğan. They act without taking any such concerns into consideration and become even less constrained by ethical values than their secular colleagues. By grace of their political identity, they undermine the moral foundations of their power.

Today's Turkey is a classic case of the rise and fall of religion in politics, or more precisely of political Islam with its potentials and limitations. In sixteen years of AKP rule, Turkey morphed from a secularist hybrid regime with a strong military guardianship into a competitive authoritarian regime that Freedom House now classifies officially as "unfree" (Freedom House 2018), as do many other human rights organisations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. "Turkey has been moving away from the European Union," as the 2018 Turkey report of the European Commission stated in unusually frank language. It is a country that at first sight looks and feels decidedly more 'Islamic' than a couple of years ago, with more women wearing headscarves or veils and many more minarets dominating the skies and soundscapes of its cities. Remarkably, this transition was achieved without a revolution and, until at least the repeat elections of November 2015, one of the markers of the country's 'exit from democracy' (Oktem and Akkoyunlu 2017), in a more or less democratic context.

Ethical Politics and the European Union

The Justice and Development Party emerged out of Turkey's mainstream Islamist National View (Millî Görüş) movement in 2001 as the reformist spin-off of the more robustly anti-Western and socially conservative Virtue Party (Refah). It won its first election indeed as the 'ethical' alternative to a set of squabbling secular parties, whose coalition government had been exposed by the Marmara Earthquake of 1999 as inadequate and powerless: more than 15,000 people died and many cities in the country's industrially most developed regions of Turkey had been reduced, while the state apparatus wasted precious days before awakening from its institutional torpor and intervened. Despite sustained attacks from the state establishment and the Kemalist opposition CHP (Republican People's Party), and repeated manipulations from the so-called deep-state (a military dominated, clandestine security apparatus) it managed to live up to the expectation of cleaner politics and better public services. Until roughly 2011, the AKP government was able to balance neoliberal growth, a level of democratic freedoms and some form of redistribution. This was helped by the commitment of the European Union, which pushed democratic reform and empowered pro-European actors, even though the promise of membership lost momentum pretty much since the day accession negotiations started in 2005. Add to that a favourable global economy that provided for easily available foreign exchange and a US administration that promoted Turkey as a model case of 'Islam, democracy and development' for the Arab Spring states, and it is easy to see that the macro-economic and political conditions were extremely benign for Turkey's governments for almost a decade.

In this period, it was indeed possible to think of the subsequent AKP governments as a successful political project. It appeared to empower and enrich formerly marginalised sections of society and especially the more conservative segments of the country, while engaging in democratic reform and shedding the deleterious impact of the military on political life.

Neo-liberalism Authoritarianism and Political Islam

As suggested by Wendy Brown and others, neoliberalism, a governing rationality in which everything is economised and subjected to the logic of the market, cannot co-exist with strong democratic institutions in the long run, and hence undermines the democratic process (Brown 2015). Thanks to the auspicious global climate and high growth rates, the AKP governments were able to engage in a prolonged balancing act that combined democratic reform, Europeanisation and the improvement of public services with a gradual de-secularisation of state and society. It was also able to engage in modest redistribution, increasingly marked as and distributed by Islamic charities. Yet it could ultimately not escape the neoliberal quandary, as not only politics but ultimately also religion, and with it any pretext of charity or ethics, became subordinated to the logic of the market. As the economy slowed following the global financial crisis of 2008, the balancing act became untenable and the neoliberal essence of AKP's economic policies visible: economic power centralised and converged on the political power centre of Erdoğan. Ever since, this network of mutually dependent actors acted as the growth engine of Turkey - loyal construction magnates, in some cases entering familial ties with Erdoğan and his immediate circle of advisors, were fuelled by state tenders and ever-megalomaniac infrastructure projects like Istanbul's new airport - slated to become Europe's largest upon opening in late 2018. In exchange, they took over most of the opposition media to ensure continued support to the regime.

This construction-fuelled, state-financed growth could not have been sustained in any case. The Gezi protests in June 2013 were a direct challenge to this developmental model built on the boundless exploitation of human labour and nature. The government's response made it clear that any space for peaceful contestation was now closed. The 'exit from democracy' became even clearer when Erdoğan ignored the June 2015 elections, which would have necessitated a coalition government with a degree of power-sharing, and had them repeated after a series of hitherto unexplained terrorist attacks. But it was the epic fallout between Erdoğan and another Islamic political movement, the followers of Fethullah Gulen, after an attempted coup attempt in July 2016, which pushed Erdoğan and his now significantly diminished inner power circle over the brink. Since the coup attempt, whose causes and actors remain shrouded in mystery, Turkey has been a country in free fall. From human rights to press freedom, from academic independence to LGBT and women's rights, from institutional capacity to judicial independence, the country has been confronted with multiple processes of contraction, dissolution and erosion.

What Remains of Political Islam?

Since the coup attempt and under the recurrent extensions of the state of emergency regime, history has accelerated beyond cognition. The coup attempt itself has been stylised into a foundational moment of Erdoğan's 'new Turkey', while a language of Islamic martyrdom and Islamo-fascist nationalism has come to dominate Erdoğan's public speeches and the now almost completely state-controlled media. Religious schools and large mosques are being built on the few remaining free spaces in the big cities, while the call to prayer is now so amplified that it causes physical discomfort to many. A referendum in 2017 to turn Turkey into a presidential system was won only after targeted vote-rigging. As a quantitative forensic analysis of the referendum suggests the "influence of (...) vote distortions were large enough to tip the overall balance from 'No' to a majority of 'Yes' votes" (Klimek et. al. 2017).

Yet it would be wrong to see this whirlwind of a seemingly Islamist takeover as the transition of Turkey into an Islamist regime. Quite to the contrary, the once pious Islamists of the Justice and Development party have turned into the exact opposite of the values they once stood for. What remains from the Islamist project is a version of neoliberal authoritarianism, with cronyism, clientelism, corruption, and oppressive social conservatism in the cloak of a pious society. This fact is not lost on a large majority of Turkish voters, including many conservative voters, who now see that it is not Islam, but money and power that fuels AKP Turkey. They have come to voice their discontent with the AKP and Erdoğan much more audibly only a year ago.

With its economy in tatters, its reputation tarnished and its European hopes dashed, Turkey's engagement with political Islam seems to have reached its endgame. All credible pollsters in Turkey emphasise that neither the AKP in the parliamentary elections, nor Erdoğan in the presidential election's first round will be able to win a clear victory. An orderly transfer of power after the June 24 elections would allow for a peaceful transition and Turkey's eventual exit from authoritarianism - a precondition for any meaningful re-engagement with the European Union. Yet even a concerted campaign of voter intimidation and electoral fraud, and a subsequent AKP government under Erdoğan would not succeed in creating the conditions of a stable dictatorship.

While it may be too early to pronounce the death of neoliberal Islamic authoritarianism in Turkey, it is safe to conclude that the Turkish case is unique in that it shows how a gradual regime takeover by an Islamist party is possible under the conditions of a relatively functioning democracy. It is, however, not unique at all in the sense that Turkey's AKP years resonate with countless other examples of unfettered abuse of power creating the conditions of its own demise.

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