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Akis Sakellariou

Political Scientist

Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos

ELIAMEP Senior Research Fellow, Associate Professor, Faculty of Political Science &
Public Administration, University of Athens

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49, Vassilissis Sofias Ave., 106 76 Athens, Greece

Tel: (+30) 210 7257110-1, Fax: (+30) 210 7257114,

e-mail: eliamep@eliamep.gr,

url: www.eliamep.gr

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Authors' Information:

Akis Sakellariou

Akis Sakellariou is a political scientist. Since 2012, he has been working at the international consulting firm The Search Group where he has completed dozens of projects focusing on businesses that operate in Greece, Cyprus and Turkey. Akis Sakellariou has worked in several think-tanks (e.g. ELIAMEP and CSIS) as well as in magazines and scientific journals in Athens, Washington DC and Istanbul. His articles have been published in several newspapers, magazines and blogs in Greece, the US and India. He holds an M.A. in Southeast European Studies (Hons) and a B.A. in Political Science and Public Administration (Valedictorian) from the University of Athens.

Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos

Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos is Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration of the University of Athens. He has also taught at the University of Crete and at the Institute Juan March, Madrid, Spain. In January-August 2003, he was Senior Research Fellow of the Hellenic Observatory, at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and in 2009-2010 he was Visiting Fellow, Southeast European Studies (SEESOX), European Studies Center, St. Antony's College, Oxford. He has studied Law at the University of Athens (LLB, 1984) and Sociology at the LSE (M. Sc.) and at Yale University (M.A. 1987, M. Phil. 1988, Ph.D. with Distinction, 1991) He has published articles in West European Politics, Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, South European Society and Politics, Journal of European Social Policy, Social Policy and Administration. He has been coordinating editor of the Greek Review of Political Science. His latest books in English are the following: *Is Southern Europe Doomed to Instability?*, co-edited with Thanos Veremis, London: Frank Cass, 2002; and *The State and Democracy in the New Southern Europe*, co-edited with Richard Gunther and P. Nikiforos Diamandouros, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Abstract:

Although most countries in the Western Balkans are consolidated democracies, in the sense that periodic and free elections take place and there is a smooth transfer of government power, they also suffer from deficits in the functioning of democracy. As different international organizations monitoring democracies have assessed deficits primarily concern the rule of law, participation of citizens in decision making and accountability, and the control of corruption. Even though the quality of democracy cannot be fully assessed on the basis of quantitative terms, estimations of international observers offer a starting basis for further comparative political research.

Key Words:

Western Balkans, democratization, quality of democracy, rule of law, accountability, political participation, corruption

Democracy in the Western Balkans: An Overview

Introduction

About a year ago, on July 1, 2013, the European Union (EU) officially welcomed Croatia as its 28th member state. Following Slovenia's entrance in 2004, Croatia became the second former Yugoslav Republic that has managed to join the European family. In the meantime, in 2013 and 2014, elections were conducted in several countries of the Western Balkans. In detail, parliamentary elections took place in June 2013 in Albania and in March 2014 in Serbia; parliamentary and presidential elections took place in April 2014 in FYROM; and European Parliament elections took place in May 2014 in Croatia, as in the rest of the EU member-states.

Given that almost a quarter of a century has passed since transition to democracy and with the possible exception of the very complicated case of Bosnia where problems of internal legitimacy remain, in the majority of West Balkan democracies there has been a periodic and more or less smooth turnover of democratically elected governments in power. In other words, democratic consolidation has been achieved in Western Balkans. That of course does not preclude the possibility of destabilization of democratic regimes in the future nor does it determine how democracies of the region perform, i.e., the quality of democracy.

The quality of democracy has started to interest political scientists after they had realized that two processes, the transition from autocratic or authoritarian rule to democracy and the consolidation of democracy, have not borne the desired fruits. Many regimes which were no longer autocracies did not really perform as real democracies. They resembled facades of democracy. To understand why and how political scientists focused on various variables such as perceptions of legitimacy, citizen participation and 'voice' (the freedom to and actual practice of expressing one's own wider political or policy-specific views), the rule of law and control of corruption. In this brief ELIAMEP Paper, we are going to contrast a formal to a more substantive understanding of how democracies function, with specific reference to West Balkan democracies.

Using formal criteria, such as the periodic, open, free and fair conducting of elections, most West Balkan countries pass the test of a functioning democracy. It was not so until recently, as for instance in Albania where the conduct of every single election since 1991 was deemed problematic by domestic and international observers. Similar problems remain to this day in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. Moreover, the performance of a functioning democracy is not a linear process and may decline over time. It is difficult to select trustworthy indicators assessing the quality of democracy across a number of countries. Cross-national measurable data may not correspond

to widely accepted impressions, based on the evolution of political developments in a single country, particularly if such developments are slow and remain largely unnoticed because they fall under the radar of usual political analysis. For instance, one could claim that the gradual control by the government of mass media in FYROM is a development which has undermined the functioning of democracy in that country.

It is then useful to see how the performance of democracies has varied over time, bearing in mind that available indicators, based on assessments of experts, will never be able to convey the nuances of functioning or dis-functioning democracies in a given country. Nevertheless, such an exercise, resembling a bird's eye view of democracy in a region, may be useful for those who in the future may wish to engage in deeper and more nuanced research on democracy in single-case studies.

This ELIAMEP Paper offers an overview of democracy in the Western Balkans from the onset of the international financial crisis (2008) up to the present (2013/2014). The second section of the paper briefly discusses constraints on and opportunities available to West Balkan democracies, such as authoritarian legacies and the impact of the EU. The third section briefly presents four different assessments of democracy made by international organizations. The fourth section focuses on four dimensions of the quality of democracy: 1) legitimacy and stability of democratic institutions 2) voice and participation 3) rule of law and 4) control of corruption. This section discusses the performance of all West Balkan countries on all four counts at the beginning of the economic crisis (in 2008-2009) and today (2014), depending on the availability of the most recent data (Some data refer to 2012-2013). The fifth section discusses the same dimensions with reference to the Western Balkans on the basis of the European Commission's (EC) Progress Reports, which are written and published in the late autumn of every year in Brussels. The concluding section summarizes the findings of the paper, indicating lessons learned as well as the limits of this research.

The context of democracy: authoritarian legacies, the impact of the EU and voter turnout in elections

Many government officials, scholars and commentators saw Croatia's accession in July 2013 as a success story for the country itself, the Western Balkans and the EU. The fact that Serbia opened accession negotiations with the EU in January 2014 and that Albania was awarded EU candidate status in June 2014 points to the same direction. According to this view, the Western Balkan states' two-decade efforts to transform their political systems into functioning democracies and their economies into liberal markets are finally paying dividends. Furthermore, this development has sent a clear message to the rest of the Western Balkan states that the EU prospect is still real for them once they finally meet the EU's so-called Copenhagen criteria.

Many others, however, have not been so optimistic. In their opinion, Croatia's success is not representative of the overall situation in Southeast Europe. Croatia started its political and economic transformation from an advanced point. The end of the Yugoslav Wars in 1995 and

Franjo Tudjman's death in 2000 removed the two major obstacles that were hindering the country's democratization. On the other hand, the democratization progress made by the rest of the Western Balkan states remains slow and uneven thus significantly reducing their chances to join the EU at some point in the foreseeable future.

Since the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in the early 1990's and the violent dissolution of the former Yugoslavia throughout that decade, the Western Balkans have gone a long way in terms of putting forward political, economic and administrative reforms as well as in aligning their legislation with the European law (*acquis communautaire*). The West Balkan states, having as their ultimate goal to join the EU, have successfully adopted formal democratic institutions enjoying the generous assistance of the international community that has invested heavily in the democratization project of the Western Balkans by spending billions of Euros, offering technical advice and using a carrot and stick policy.

Despite that progress, many problems still exist. Among others, the Western Balkans have to grapple with an authoritarian legacy that is often difficult to overcome. Moreover, significant segments of the population believe that their countries' democratic transition has been imposed in a top-down way by the local elites and the international community while domestic politics are polarized along party and/or ethnic lines. Furthermore, there are still unresolved statehood issues, rule of law faces challenges, corruption remains widespread, public administration is politicized and inefficient, media freedom is not completely guaranteed and civil society remains weak. On top of that, the ongoing economic crisis has been threatening the Western Balkan states' fragile social cohesion while the EU's enlargement fatigue has increased Euroscepticism in the region and might have a reverse effect on democratic reforms.

It is telling, for instance, that in Croatia the turnout in the European Parliament elections of May 2014 was just 25 per cent (reflecting a general East European trend in the same elections). Obviously, European Parliament elections are nowhere considered as important as national elections. The turnout in parliamentary or presidential elections has differed from country to country and is a first sign of the level of satisfaction with democracy in the countries under study. One could argue that low percentage shares of voter turnout in national elections indicate a dis-satisfaction to democracy, if not the reign of a culture of political cynicism among voters. It is not an exclusive indicator of the quality of democracy, but it is a useful point to begin with.

To start with, in the most recent Montenegrin parliamentary elections (October 2012) the voter turnout was 71 per cent. In the Albanian parliamentary elections of June 2013, turnout was 53 per cent. In the Serbian parliamentary elections of March 2014, turnout was also 53 per cent. In the parliamentary and presidential elections which coincided in April 2014 in FYROM turnout was 63 per cent. Finally, in Croatia, in the European Parliament elections of May 2014 turnout was just 25 per cent, but in the most recent parliamentary elections (December 2011) had been 62 per cent. In other words, as far as the interest of citizens of the West Balkan countries in the elections is concerned, the results are far from disappointing. This is all the more so if we take into consideration the low voter turnout in some countries of Eastern Europe in the previous decade (e.g., in the

Romanian parliamentary elections of 2009 the voter turnout was 39 percent and in the Polish parliamentary elections of 2005 the voter turnout was 41 per cent).

One may claim that high voter turnout indicates a well-functioning democracy. This is however not a safe conclusion. As it is well known, a high interest in politics may coincide with a period of intense political strife, a polarization that may bring democracy to its knees or even lead to civil war.

Moreover, doubts have been raised about how updated and correct the lists of citizens eligible to vote have been in several West Balkan countries. Lists may contain the names of deceased citizens, while the same citizen may have registered to vote in two different locations. In other words, the total number of citizens who have the right to vote may be inflated, thus forbidding the exercise of correctly assessing the citizens' interest in participating in the elections.

In view of the above, alternative measures of quality of democracy may be sought. The promotion of democracy has been at the top of the agenda of several international organizations, NGO's and think-tanks that have invested significant resources in order to assess the pace and quality of the democratic transformation in several countries and regions across the globe, including the Western Balkans. These assessments, which are either qualitative or quantitative, are the product of different methodologies and use a wide range of indicators. Their findings are regularly published either in the form of reports or scores/ratings.

Assessments of Democracy

The World Bank produces its annual Worldwide Governance Indicators report since 1996. The report, which is a combination of the views of several enterprise, citizen and expert survey respondents, assesses the performance of more than two hundred states in six dimensions of governance. Examples of such indicators, which will be used in this paper, are "Voice and Accountability", "Rule of Law" and "Control of Corruption". World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators use a scale from -2,5 (the lowest possible score) to 2,5 (the highest possible score).

The German think-tank Bertelsmann Stiftung publishes every two years the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) that "analyzes and evaluates whether and how developing countries and countries in transition are steering social change toward democracy and a market economy." The report is divided into two indices: a) the Status Index and b) the Management Index. The Status Index is sub-divided into the "Political Transformation" and "Economic Transformation" sections.

BTI covers 128 states, including all the Western Balkan states. Experts are asked to evaluate whether -or to what extent- 17 criteria are being met in each country. Examples of BTI "criteria" or indicators, which will be used in this paper, are "Stability of Democratic Institutions", "Rule of Law" and "Political Participation". The score which experts are asked to assign to such indicators varies between 0 (the lowest possible score) and 10 (the highest possible score).

The Fund for Peace is the third institution which engages in assessments of democracy. The Washington-based think tank publishes -in collaboration with Foreign Policy- its annual Failed States

Index since 2005. FSI's main ambition was to become "... a critical tool in highlighting not only the normal pressures that all states experience, but also in identifying when those pressures are pushing a state towards the brink of failure".

The Failed States Index is based on content analysis, qualitative and quantitative data. Its first publication (2005) included 75 states which have progressively increased into nearly 180. Despite this fact, FSI does not include territories whose status remains unclear and are not UN members. Therefore, Kosovo is not included in the index. An example of FSI indicators, which will be included in this paper, is "Criminalization and/or Delegitimization of the State". The FSI indicators obtain values varying between 10 (lowest possible score or high intensity) and 0 (best possible score or low intensity).

Transparency International publishes annually its Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). The index, which was first published in 1995, measures the perceived levels of public sector corruption -mainly among public officials and politicians- in several states. The 2012 CPI ranked 176 states, including all the Western Balkan states. The score varies between 0 (the lowest possible score or highly corrupt) and 100 (the highest possible score or very clean).

And last but not least, the Freedom House (FH) publishes annually a survey titled Nations in Transit which includes the WB countries. The FH employs many indicators which do not clearly overlap with the indicators of the other four organizations mentioned above. FH ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest.

Legitimation and Political Stability

The FSI indicator "Criminalization and/or Delegitimization of the State" examines state legitimacy. More specifically, it assesses issues related to corruption, government effectiveness, political participation, electoral process, level of democracy, illicit economy, drug trade, protests and demonstrations and finally power struggles.

Table 1: Delegitimization of the State According to the Fund for Peace's Failed States Index (FSI)

	2009	2014
Albania	7.3	6.5
Bosnia	8.2	6.8
Croatia	4.5	3.7
FYROM	7.4	5.8
Kosovo	-	-
Montenegro	4.7	4.3
Serbia	7.3	5.8

Source: <http://ffp.statesindex.org/rankings-2014>, last accessed on 24.07.2014

According to Table 1, all the WB states (with the exception of Kosovo that it is not included in the rankings, owing to lack of data) have made progress in the "Criminalization and/or Deligitimization of the State" indicator since 2009. In the FSI 2014 rankings, Bosnia, FYROM and Serbia have made the most considerable progress compared to the 2009 rankings. Overall, Croatia and Montenegro have been the strongest performers while Bosnia and Albania have been the weakest performers.

Table 2: Stability of Democratic Institutions According to Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI)

	2008	2014
Albania	8.0	6.5
Bosnia	6.0	5.0
Croatia	9.0	8.5
FYROM	8.0	7.0
Kosovo	7.0	6.5
Montenegro	8.0	8.5
Serbia	7.5	8.0

Source: <http://www.bti-project.org/index/>, last accessed on 24.07.2014

The Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index, which has an indicator measuring the "stability of democratic institutions", also shows that in 2008 and in 2014 Croatia led WB countries in terms of stability, almost on a par with followed by Montenegro and Serbia (in 2014). The most unstable democracies in 2008 and 2014 were Bosnia and Kosovo.

In sum, on the basis of two different assessments, there is convergence towards considering Croatia and Montenegro the most stable democracies, while Bosnia and Kosovo the most unstable.

Rule of Law

Table 3: Rule of Law According to World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators

	2009	2012
Albania	-0.53	-0.57
Bosnia	-0.36	-0.23
Croatia	0.14	0.21
FYROM	-0.27	-0.24
Kosovo	-0.63	-0.56
Montenegro	0.07	0.01
Serbia	-0.44	-0.39

Source: <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.aspx#home>, last accessed on 24.07.2014

According to the World Bank's governance indicators for both 2009 and 2012 the WB democracies in which rule of law was implemented relatively better were Croatia and Montenegro. The worst performers for both years were Albania, Kosovo and Serbia.

Table 4: Rule of Law According to Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI)

	2008	2014
Albania	6.3	5.0
Bosnia	6.8	6.5
Croatia	8.0	8.3
FYROM	6.8	6.8
Kosovo	5.5	5.5
Montenegro	6.8	6.8
Serbia	7.0	7.3

Source: <http://www.bti-project.org/index/>, last accessed on 24.07.2014

According to the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index, in 2008 and 2014 the rule of law was best preserved in Croatia and Serbia, while the worst performers on this indicator in the same years were Albania and Kosovo.

The Fund for Peace's Failed States Index (not shown here with regard to 'rule of law') indicates that Croatia and FYROM were the best countries in terms of rule of law in 2009 but in 2013 the best ones were Croatia, FYROM and Montenegro. In both years the worst performers were Albania, Bosnia and Serbia (not Albania and Kosovo, as in Tables 3 and 4 above). The perceived difference between this index and the two previous ones may be owed to the fact that the Fund for Peace's index measures together "violation of human rights and rule of law" and does not include Kosovo in its list of WB countries.

In sum, there is a tentative agreement among the sources referred to in this section that the rule of law is best preserved in Croatia and Montenegro, while Serbia is a disputed case. Apparently, the rule of law is least preserved in Albania and Kosovo.

Voice and Participation

The World Bank uses an indicator titled 'Voice and Accountability' which is different from the Bertelsmann Stiftung's "Political Participation" indicator. The former measures perceptions concerning free elections, freedom of expression, freedom of association and free media. The latter, on the other hand, measures to what extent the populace decides who rules and the existence of other political freedoms. Yet, there is a common element in both approaches, namely their concern with assessing the freedom to voice political opinions and elects the rulers. In that sense, the two indicators are comparable and, in conjunction with the other three indicators used in this paper, may help assess the quality of democracy in WB.

Table 5: Voice and Accountability According to World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators

	2009	2012
Albania	0.13	0.01
Bosnia	-0.04	-0.14
Croatia	0.44	0.48
FYROM	0.15	0.00
Kosovo	-0.11	-0.22
Montenegro	0.26	0.23
Serbia	0.32	0.17

Source: <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.aspx#home>, last accessed on 24.07.2014

According to the World Bank's governance indicators for both 2009 and 2012 the WB countries which did relatively better in terms of voice and accountability were Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro. The countries which did worse were Bosnia and Kosovo.

Table 6: Political Participation According to Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI)

	2008	2014
Albania	8,3	7,0
Bosnia	8,5	7,5
Croatia	9,5	8,8
FYROM	8,8	7,3
Kosovo	8,3	7,3
Montenegro	8,5	8,0
Serbia	8,8	8,3

Source: <http://www.bti-project.org/index/>, last accessed on 24.07.2014

According to the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index , there are few differences in the levels of political participation among WB countries. In 2008 and 2014 political participation was more extensive in Croatia and Serbia, while FYROM, which had been on a par with these two countries in 2008, slipped six years later. Participation was comparatively limited in Albania, Bosnia and Kosovo.

In sum, democratic participation was more advanced in 2008-2014 in Croatia and Serbia, but much less so in Albania and Kosovo.

Control of corruption

Table 7: Control of Corruption According to World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators

	2009	2012
Albania	-0,49	-0,72
Bosnia	-0,37	-0,30
Croatia	-0,10	-0,04
FYROM	-0,10	0,02
Kosovo	-0,56	-0,62
Montenegro	-0,16	-0,10
Serbia	-0,31	-0,31

Source: <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.aspx#home>, last accessed on 24.07.2014

The World Bank's governance indicators for both 2009 and 2012 indicate that the most corrupt WB countries were Kosovo and Albania. In both years the least corrupt were Croatia and FYROM. Another assessment is offered by Transparency International, through perceptions of the extent of corruption. As it is well known, these are summarized by the index 'Corruption Perception Index' (CPI, Table 8).

There are some differences in the CPI over time, but it should be stressed that Transparency International discourages scientists to use CPI data in order to make overtime comparisons. We therefore focus only on the estimates of comparison for 2014 which show that, as in the Table 7, compiled on the basis of World Bank data, Albania and Kosovo are considered the most corrupt, while Croatia the least corrupt WB country. Notably the differences among WB are not extremely large (the two extremes of the range of CPI are CPI 48 for Croatia and CPI 31 for Albania).

Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)

Table 8: Corruption According to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)

	2009	2014
Albania	32	31
Bosnia	30	42
Croatia	41	48
FYROM	38	44
Kosovo	28	33
Montenegro	39	44
Serbia	35	42

Source: <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2013/results>, last accessed on 24.07.2014

In sum, corruption is quite extensive in Albania and Kosovo, but less extensive in Croatia.

Conclusions

Despite the problems that are associated with rough, numerical comparisons among countries, it is still possible to draw some preliminary conclusions on the four dimensions of the quality of democracy presented in the previous pages. Croatia stands out among the Western Balkan countries and it is followed by Montenegro which performs relatively well with regard to political stability and the rule of law. Of course, many people would dispute this conclusion, given that more or less the same political elite has been governing Montenegro since its transition to democracy. Indeed, other countries have survived stronger challenges to democracy. Serbia, for instance, has travelled a long and tortuous road since the fall of Milosevic from power (2000) and seems to have progressed over time. This is shown in Serbia's comparatively high marks on democratic stability and political participation (shown in Table 2 and 6 above).

On all four dimensions presented in this paper, Albania and Kosovo perform the worst, with Albania being more stable than Bosnia, a country which is also ranked lowly with regard to the rule of law and political participation.

While in all the Western Balkan countries democratic consolidation has been achieved, there are clear differences in the quality of democracy. A more thorough and country-focused research would be necessary in order to explain these differences. One could lay out explanatory hypotheses which may inform further research. While one should look for deeper causes for the observed variation in long-term (structural, internal and/or external) factors, not all long-term explanations would be helpful. Explanations based on old (e.g., 19th century or even inter-war) historical trajectories are not so useful. Old historical legacies do not seem to impact the quality of democracy encountered in today's West Balkans. We should not forget that in the 19th century Croatian territories belonged to the Hapsburg Empire, whereas the Albanian and Kosovar territories to the Ottoman Empire, but this sort of explanation can illuminate very little recent, namely early 21st century, political developments in these countries.

A more useful hypothesis, suitable for further comparative research, would be a configuration of three explanatory factors. These are: 1) the initial economic conditions at the time of transition 2) the presence of intense internal civil and political strife weakening the state after 1989 and 3) the stage at which a country is on the road to the EU. Obviously, compared to Croatia, Kosovo and Albania were very poor in 1989-1991. In other words, they made the transition to democracy and the market from a disadvantaged position. In the 1990s, Bosnia and Kosovo went through wars, while Albania experienced extensive civil strife. Political conflict in Croatia and Montenegro, and even in Serbia, never reached the threshold of political explosions that took place in Bosnia, Kosovo and Albania. And after some initial hesitation, the EU opened to Croatia the road to EU accession in a faster and more conclusive manner compared to the rest of the West Balkan countries.

Naturally, the explanatory factors sketched here did not function independently of each other. Domestic and external developments fed into each other. These explanatory factors, which reflect a historical institutional approach to political and social change and integrate both domestic and

external aspects of political and social transformation, may help us interpret differences in the performance of contemporary West Balkan democracies. Each of them has its own idiosyncracies, but as they are gradually integrated into the larger context of global and European integration they face similar challenges. In brief, West Balkan democracies constitute a 'natural laboratory', so to speak, which allows for a useful analysis of the pitfalls of and opportunities for improving the quality of democracy.