



Illiberalism in the Western Balkans?

by Tzveta Dryanovska

Recent political developments in the Western Balkans have led the EU to re-focus its attention on the region. Countries in southeastern Europe have been struggling to embrace and implement reforms that would steer them along the path towards EU accession. The recent rise in political tensions in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Albania and Serbia clearly illustrates the worrying trends in the region, including poisonous nationalist rhetoric, widespread corruption and the drift towards the centralisation of power.

This was showcased by Skopje's failure to form a government for four months after the elections held in December 2016 and increasing signs of discontent in a politically divided society. Similarly, in Belgrade, newly elected President (and outgoing PM) Vucic has succeeded in concentrating power in his party's hands while disregarding the growing opposition against him. Finally, in Tirana, the divisions between the ruling party and the opposition (which initially demanded the resignation of the current government over accusations that it will not conduct free elections) became so acute that they resulted in a three-month long political deadlock which has put future general elections in jeopardy.

Between Belgrade and Skopje

In Serbia, presidential elections in early April 2017 resulted in former Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic becoming the new president with a solid majority of 55% of the votes. While some have seen this as

a continuation of the *status quo* in Serbian politics, dominated by Vucic's SNS party, thousands of protesters taking to the streets calling for Vucic to resign tell a different story. The demonstrators were disgruntled by the growing centralisation of power around Vucic and the erosion of the rule of law in the country. In addition to cracking down on media and political opposition, Vucic and the SNS have also been accused of manipulating the election process by monopolising media coverage in the run-up to the vote while threatening and bribing voters. Furthermore, opposition parties have supported the protests and have called for a re-count. While protests have remained peaceful, they illustrate growing popular discontent with a model of behaviour closely mirroring that adopted until recently by former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski.

The 'Macedonian model', if there is one, could be characterised by increasingly authoritarian and anti-democratic developments and elements of state capture. Following wiretapping scandals involving the ruling VMRO-DPMNE party in April 2016, the streets of Skopje were filled with thousands of protesters demanding the resignation of Gruevski and his government. The situation further deteriorated a few months later, in December 2016, when parliamentary elections saw a coalition of opposition parties win 67 out of 120 seats in parliament. The incumbent government, however, refused to cede power to the opposition, and President Ivanov blocked the forming of a new government where

the opposition would hold a majority. What is more, in the run-up to the elections civil society organisations, journalists and opposition figures were threatened. Even so, following an outbreak of violence in the country's parliament and subsequent international pressure to resolve the crisis peacefully, President Ivanov finally awarded opposition leader Zoran Zaev the mandate to form a new government, thus paving the way for a resolution of the two-year political deadlock.

The newly elected Serbian president, however, does not seem to take the protests against him too seriously. On the contrary, he has hailed the demonstrations as a healthy symptom of democracy, while pro-government media outlets fuel tensions by either downplaying the size of the demonstrations or just ignoring them, and by delegitimising the opposition through allegations that the protesters plan to turn violent and could jeopardise political stability in the country. Thus, while Vucic's grip on power has tightened, his internal policies could actually lead to more serious tensions.

Tirana's deadlock

In Albania, political tensions between Prime Minister Edi Rama and his current ruling coalition on one side, and the opposition Democratic Party headed by Lulzim Basha on the other, led to a three-month political deadlock. In February 2017 the opposition party renewed its calls for the government to resign and be replaced by a technocratic caretaker cabinet. For example, the Rama government proposed a judicial reform with a view to taking further steps towards European integration, but the opposition accused it of using the reform to centralise power and distort the fairness of the forthcoming elections. The opposition also demanded the introduction of electronic voting for the upcoming elections, but the government argued it would not be possible to introduce the reform at such short notice.

Basha's rhetoric was also supported by sit-in protests in Tirana, as well as the boycotting of the parliament in an effort to obstruct the judicial reform. The opposition also claimed it would not participate in the forthcoming elections and expand its protests to the rest of Albania. Antagonistic rhetoric was further evident in the opposition's accusations that the current government is not only authoritarian in nature, but also involved in criminal activities and drug trafficking.

Despite the animosity between the two parties, Albania's political deadlock was recently resolved when a compromise deal was struck between the two sides through the 'McAllister-plus' proposal,

backed by the EU and the US. The judicial reform issue was resolved by a provision to create a body which would vet judges and prosecutors. Moreover, a further provision designed to accommodate Basha's demands was also introduced – the opposition will be able to appoint technocrats to seven of the future ministries, including the interior and justice portfolios. Likewise, concerns of electoral fairness will be addressed by allowing the Democratic Party to choose the head of the election commission, as well as introducing electronic voting in the next elections. Hence, despite uncompromising rhetoric from both political sides and the failure of some previous mediation efforts undertaken by the international community, political tensions in Albania did not reach breaking point. While bearing some resemblance to the political situation in former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, then, the political impasse in Albania seems to have been resolved in a much shorter timeframe and without any outbreaks of violence.

Keep calm but don't carry on

Still, the path towards democratic consolidation for the Western Balkan states remains a long and difficult one. With the curbing of independent media, control of the judiciary, pressure on civil society, and rising unchecked corruption, new sources of political instability have emerged in these countries. The lack of a tangible prospect of accession to the EU may have encouraged established rulers to drift towards illiberalism and authoritarian rule; in turn, however, such drifts risk making that prospect even more remote. This said, such trends should not be overstated and lead observers to conclude that countries in the Western Balkans are on the brink of collapse or violence. Inflammatory political rhetoric is not new to the region and is consciously exploited by elites, mostly to detract attention from underlying domestic problems and political clashes. For the time being international pressure has succeeded in preventing the outbreak of a political crisis in Albania, and has put an end to the one in former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, where the new government has already taken some bold steps to break the vicious circle of the previous years.

Meanwhile, in Serbia, the opposition is still gaining traction but lacks the ability to challenge the centralisation of power by Vucic. If political actors do not take tangible steps towards reform to address the ongoing illiberal trends in an effective and irreversible manner, political instability could re-emerge once again in the region.

Tzveta Dryanovska is a Junior Analyst at the EUISS.

