Managing Democratization and Nation-Building

in South-eastern Europe (the Western Balkans)

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between ethnic majorities and minorities is of vital importance to any polity. In this article Dr. Guzina questions whether the Western approach to liberal democratization is appropriate in the Balkans, considering the lack of positive results over the past decade. The model being utilized in the region favours a type of nation-building that does not support multi-cultural integration, nor reinforce democratic reform. The author believes the international community has underestimated the role that ethnic groups have to play, even where the desire for political autonomy exists.

Given the horrific experiences with fratricidal, ethnic war in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the early 1990s, an international consensus was agreed upon (the UN, the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and the USA) which emphasized that conventional institutes of democratic governance (regular free and fair elections, rule of law and respect for human rights) should be fine-tuned to manage ethnic and cultural diversity in conflict-torn societies. For these reasons, the newly emerged belief system of the international community was organized around achieving two interrelated goals: developing politically stable, liberal-democratic states on the one side, and integrating ethnicity as an unavoidable political ingredient of the post-communist South-eastern European societies, on the other.

But such an approach invites two important questions. Should the Western philosophical principles of liberal pluralism and ethnocultural justice be promoted as a means to solving ethnic tensions in the Western Balkans and elsewhere? (Kymlicka and Opalski, 2001) And, is there a strong direct correlation between the Western project of liberal democratization and the local projects of nation-building in the region? Or, to put it differently, are the interests and belief systems of the international policy-makers and local political elites qualitatively different?

The answer to these questions will proceed in two parts. I will first elaborate on the international blueprint for democracy building, and then compare the blueprint with the theory and practice of nation-building in South-eastern Europe. The ultimate objective of the paper is to evaluate the basic assumptions of the international approach to democratization and nation-building and offer some tentative suggestions for the unsatisfying results of the reform policies in the region.

Blueprint for Democratization

The benchmark of the entire democratization literature has been the experiences with democratization in Latin America and southern Europe in 1970s and 1980s. For better or for worse, most of the reigning wisdom in the literature has found its way into post-communist studies in a rather non-discriminatory fashion (Bunce, 2003). Thus, despite the collapse of the former Yugoslavia, nobody seemed to challenge the core assumption of the democratization paradigm that state and democracy-building are supposed to be mutually reinforcing exercises – two sides of the same coin.

However, after 15 years of experimenting with democratization in post-communist, multi-nation countries, a series of challenges has emerged that require sober second thought on the applicability of the central tenet of this paradigm. For example, why should we assume that there is a direct correlation between the nation and democracy-building? What if the optimism of the dominant literature and international policy makers is unjustifiable? What if fundamental individual liberties and communal claims are not necessarily reconcilable in each and every case, or even in the long run?

These questions seem to be of the utmost importance for the South-eastern European countries. As early as 1970, Dankwart Rustow wrote that transition to democracy might be a futile exercise without the so-called "background condition." In Rustow's words, "[I]t simply means that the vast majority of citizens in a democracy to be must have no doubts or mental reservations at to which political community they belong to." (p.350) In other words, the background condition represents the level of achieved national unity in any given state beyond which the very boundaries and identities of the state and political community will not be challenged.

It is fair to say that the International Community has been concerned with the lack of national unity in conflict-torn societies. This is the reason why managing ethnic and cultural diversity plays such an important role in their approaches to Bosnia, Macedonia, and Kosovo. The OHR's (the Office of the High Representative in Bosnia-Herzegovina) imposition

of constitutional amendments in April, 2002 to bring institutional arrangements of the entities in line with the constitution of the entire state, the Ohrid Agreement on the relationship between Macedonians and Albanians in Macedonia, the Belgrade Agreement on the relationship between Serbia and Montenegro, and the imposition of an entire constitutional framework in Kosovo in May, 2001 are all examples of the IC's awareness of a very tense relationship between the (lack of) national unity in the region and democratization.

Still, whether international involvement is to be perceived as bureaucratic meddling (Chandler, 2004) or necessary and just intervention in support of democratization is open to debate. John McGarry, one of the leading scholars on power sharing arrangements as the right tools for managing diversity, is quick to point out that "[T]he prospects for success will be enhanced if the federation emerges internally from a bargain worked out by the leaders of all the groups." He also argues that "constitution making process should be as democratic as possible, and that no outside force should pick delegates, directly or indirectly." (2004, p.5)

These standards are of a very high order and none of the internationally run states fulfils them. In fact, not only are these standards not fulfilled, but they are constantly being bypassed with *bona fide* actions on the part of the IC representatives in Bosnia or Kosovo in the name of democracy: overwriting parliamentary decisions, banning certain politicians from participating in elections, imposing laws and regulations, and so on (Chandler, 2004; Bieber, 2004). Hence, even though international policy makers are aware of the "background condition" problem, their approach is still based on trust in the primacy of democratization over nation-building; that is, in the coincidence between the state and democracy building. Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of the international protectorate of Kosovo, where the question of its ultimate status is constantly being postponed in vain belief that democratization will make the question irrelevant (International Crisis Group Report, 2003).

But, in the essentially contested states, institution and nation-building practices are not mutually reinforcing exercises. Rather, they should be understood as convoluted and mutually contradictory practices that quite often work against one another. In the next section, the reasons why they do not always work together will be further explored.

(Lack of) National Unity and Democratization

After the collapse of communism, a multiparty system was adopted everywhere in South-eastern Europe (the Western Balkans), while fundamental freedoms were recognized and guaranteed by the Constitution in each and every post-communist state. However, the role of the state and the relationship between its citizens has been, and still is, conditioned by controversial relations between ethnic majorities and minorities. The prevailing model of the state in the Balkans is still a combination of two traditional European models of modernization – the French and the German. I will call this model the Balkan model of the nation-state, and for most scholars and practitioners this model is at the heart of the problem with unsuccessful democratic changes in most of the Western Balkan states. So what are the main features of this hybrid model of development?

The French model emphasizes centralism, while the German model provides/legitimizes the link between the majority ethnic group and the state. Fused together, they provide a model of a perpetually homogenizing and centralizing nation-state. Under such conditions, the fear of minority claims is so strong that the Balkan states prefer not to grant local government to the whole population rather than guarantee similar rights to their respective minorities (Bianchini, 1998). An excellent example of the fear of decentralization has been Macedonia (at least until the Ohrid Agreement). Only under great international pressure did the Macedonian government agree to decentralization. Another one is the case of the northern region of Vojvodina in Serbia, whose toothless autonomy does not bear any resemblance to the previous province's status in the former Yugoslavia (Devic, 2003).

Consequently, despite the persistent international emphasis on civil society and the protection of human and minority rights in the region, domestic elites perceive nation-building in a strategic fashion, while the democratization discourse is used solely for tactical purposes of legitimizing one's position internationally.

The state in the Western Balkans is seen by most political entrepreneurs as a precious prize to be won for the purposes of protecting one's nation (a dominant ethnic group) over the interest of various "others" (ethnic minorities). Consequently, despite the persistent international emphasis on civil society and the protection of human and minority rights in the region, domestic elites perceive nation-building in a strategic fashion, while the democratization discourse is used solely for tactical purposes of legitimizing one's position internationally. Constitutional legislation (whether it is internationally imposed or not) on the protection of minority rights in the region does not change the fact that members of minorities, or dissenting members of one's nation, are objectified as political enemies or the inferior other by the very ideal of a perpetually homogenizing nation-state.

The key to the region's democratization thus is in changing the very ideal, model, and practices of the Balkan nation-state. However, there are two problems with this account – the problems that are also present in the IC approach to the region. First, the argument is circular; in

order to become democratic local elites have to give up on nation-building, but in order to do so, they already have to be democratic. At least in the case of the IC, this paradox is easily solvable. If local leaders (and population) are not yet democratic, they will become so through the gubernatorial decrees of UN representatives in Bosnia and Kosovo (Rousseauldian solution of forcing someone to become free by enforcing upon them the "right" democratic choice).

In the case of local elites' choices, the problem is much harder to solve. A short overview of domestic policies that dominated the political agenda of the 1990s will support my point that the clash between democracy and nation-building is still perceived as the most important social cleavage in the region.

Both Bulgaria and Croatia enjoy stability that is based on the status of the majority nations as a *staatsvolk* (state dominant nation). The road to stability, however, didn't follow the normative concepts of liberal pluralism and ethnocultural justice (as prophesized by liberal theory), but rather typical 19th and early 20th century European homogenizing policies towards achieving an ethnically homogenized nation-state, but in the context of the late twentieth century. Still, in both cases the dominant nations enjoy a comfortable majority of over 80% of the population. So it is fair to argue that their elites are close to discovering that it is more politically opportune to trade the security discourse for the one on the post-modern western European practices of non-territorial autonomy and multicultural integration. The lure of the EU is strong in both countries and it can only work towards softening ethnic aspects of national identities is these states.

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Serbia is facing the tough choice – should it continue to perceive Kosovo as a legitimate part of its territory or not? Without, Kosovo, Serbia may emerge as a state in which Serbs enjoy the same numerical preponderance as is the case with Croatia and Bulgaria. However, as long as the Kosovo question remains on the agenda, ethnicity rather than political integration, and security discourse rather than democratization, will most likely continue to haunt Serbian reform policies.

Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia all represent an experimental ground for the International Community's efforts to democratize failed states through external pressures (Bieber and Daskalovski, 2003). However, the right balance between various forms of ethnic conflict management and democratization techniques keeps escaping the international policy-makers, forcing the permanent institutionalization of the international presence in the region.

With the exception of Vojvodina and small areas in Bosnia (Tuzla region), multiculturalism has not fulfilled its promises so far; in fact, quite to the contrary. When it was tried (or imposed by the IC), as in Kosovo and Bulgaria, multicultural integration was perceived by the domestic populace as an ideological export that is either completely out of the context (Kosovo), or just a catchy phrase for the old-fashioned policies of ethnic containment (Bulgaria, in the case of the Roma population and the Pomaks).

Instruments of power sharing did not fair much better. So far they were more successful in reinforcing centrifugal tendencies than in providing a framework for multi-ethnic cohabitation. Why did they fail? The lesson that international policy framers keep forgetting is that when they work (the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain) a crucial requirement for power sharing is present – a grand coalition of willing partners that are fully devoted to the rules of consociationalism and democracy. So far, this criterion has not been fulfilled in Bosnia, Kosovo or Macedonia, which makes the entire effort of the International Community openly problematic.

In addition, the federal structure of Bosnia-Herzegovina as defined in the Dayton, Ohio Peace Agreement of November 21, 1995, is perilously close to that of former Yugoslavia with only one discernible difference: the rhetorical emphasis on the formal institutions of liberal democracy rather than principles of socialist self-management. If this remains so, then the latest experiment in territorial arrangements in Bosnia-Herzegovina simply will not work. Moreover, federalism suffers from the same flows as the power sharing arrangements in the region. For Bosnian Serbs and Croats' national elites (or Albanian in Macedonia), territorial autonomy represents a second-best solution, far more inferior to the idea of separation from Bosnia (Macedonia). Hence, despite all the international efforts, the unintended consequences of territorial decentralization, power sharing and federalism in the region are the ones of the further encroachment of ethnicity over supposedly democratic institutions of newly democratizing multinational states in the region.

Conclusion

Why have these "proven" techniques of democracy building and power sharing not worked so far? An easy answer might be that applied power sharing techniques never succeed and that time has come for the International Community to continue only with the imposition of traditional institutes of liberal democracy in the region. I am inclined to look for the answer somewhere else.

Both democratization and nation-building approaches are quite often used in a template-like fashion rather than

as tools that should be fine-tuned to fit the concrete conditions in the area. The international approach does not take into account how political resources are being mobilized in the region in the first place. What is missing from the IC's approach is that mobilization potential controlled by an ethnic group is vital for its survival as a political and social movement. In other words, only those ethnic groups who, prior to first multiparty elections, have already had a full control over large organizational and financial resources could create strong (ethnic) parties. Pro-democratic parties could not emerge strong simply because their access to polity was effectively blocked (Devic, 2002).

The entire constitutional structure of Bosnia and suggested constitutional arrangements in Kosovo and Macedonia further solidified gains of nationalist parities, while at the same time effectively blocking the links between civil society and political structures across the region (Bieber, 2004). Thus, no wonder that the final outcome of democracy and nation-building experiments in the remaining multination states in the Western Balkans is a mono-ethnic individual living in a multiethnic state. Such an individual can at best perceive such a state as a temporary shelter, but it is still an open question whether such a state could be perceived as a home as well. The answer to this question will ultimately suggest the response to another question: to what extent the international experimentation with democracy and nation-building in the Western Balkans is successful (or not)?

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