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The third wave of autocratisation and the Western Balkans

Abstract



The third wave of autocratisation began globally at some point in the 1990s. In the Western Balkans it became a clear pattern in the 2010s. The vast majority of democracies emerged during the three waves of democratisation. By analysing the annual reports of Freedom House and reviewing the relevant scholarly analyses, the author identifies the early 2010s as the beginning of the third wave of autocratisation in the Western Balkans. This trend turned all countries in the region into hybrid regimes and stabilitocracies. All relevant external actors helped this process: the EU and the USA by endorsing stability rather than democracy, and China and Russia by supporting autocratic tendencies. During global and regional waves of autocratisation it is difficult to expect local democratisations. The author suggests that only a new regional wave of democratisation could potentially reverse the process, and that it would need external support of international liberal actors.

Keywords



third wave of autocratisation, hybrid regimes, stabilitocracy, Western Balkans

Modern democracies are a relatively novel concept. Samuel P. Huntington identified the United States of America as the first modern democracy. It reached that status after the presidential elections of 1828. On that occasion, for the first time, the majority of males could vote in the United States, but that referred to white males only. During this “long wave of democratisation” (1928-1926), over thirty countries “established at least minimal national democratic institutions”. (Huntington, 1991: 17) Huntington accepted Jonathan Sunshine’s definition of 19th-century democracy. It includes male suffrage above 50%, and “a responsible executive who either must maintain majority support in an elected parliament or is chosen in periodic popular elections.” (Huntington, 1991: 16) He identified three waves of democratisation, and also two reverse waves.

During the first wave of democratisation, some of the best-known modern democracies appeared: the USA, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, France and others. Yet, another stream appeared in 1922 and continued till 1942. Huntington called that stream the first reverse way. During this first wave of autocratisation, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany emerged. (Huntington, 1991: 16-18)

One cannot fail to notice that the second wave of democratisation (1943-62) overlaps with the period when Pax Americana reached its climax. It was the period when the global economic supremacy of the United States was clear, and when the USA became the leader of the so-called free world. Wherever the United States was present in both military and economic terms, democratisation followed. In this period the club of democracies expanded to include Italy, Germany, Japan, Greece, Turkey and some Latin American countries. The second reverse way, or the second wave of autocratisation, followed (1958-1975). It affected Latin America, South Korea, Pakistan, Turkey, Greece and, briefly, India (1975-1977).

The third wave of democratisation began in 1974, and there is still no consensus on when it ended, but it was at some point at the very end

of the 20th or in the early 21st century. The countries of Southern Europe were the first to join the club of liberal democracies (Portugal, Greece and Spain). They were followed by Latin American countries, the Philip-pines (1986), South Korea (1987) and Mongolia (1990). In the 1990s, the countries of Eastern Europe also joined the group. Among the countries that emerged after the breakup of Yugoslavia, only Slovenia became a liberal democracy in this period.

What is important regarding the concept of the three waves of democ-ratisation is that the vast majority of cases of democratisation happened during the course of one of the three waves (1928-1926, 1943-1962, 1974-?). There is yet no consensus on when the third wave ended, but it lasted at least till 1994. The problem for the societies that aspire to become democracies is that each wave of democratisation was followed by a wave of autocratisation, and cases of democratisation during the first two reverse (autocratic) waves (1922-1942, 1958-1975) were very rare indeed.¹

In the period 1980-2000, the substantial global rise of democracies doubled their total numbers. The fall of the Berlin Wall seemed sym-bolically to be the real turning point. This led some scholars to liberal triumphalism, and F. Fukuyama even contemplated the idea of the end of history. Many a researcher was led to believe that liberal democracy had secured its global victory. All such predictions turned out to be pre-mature.

The definition of democracy was changed and expanded during the second and particularly during the third wave of democratisation. Stand-ards were substantially widened, and democracy became a complex notion that had to meet several requirements. Most researchers of de-mocracy accept the definition proposed by Robert Dahl, which includes eight institutional guarantees: freedom to form and join organizations, freedom of expression, right to vote, eligibility for public office, right of political leaders to compete for support and for votes, alternative sources of information, free and fair elections, and institutions for making government policies that depend on votes and other expressions of preference. (Dahl, 1971: 3)

Global outlook of liberal democracies in the early 21st century

Some scholars believe that the third wave of democratisation turned into its opposite as early as 1994. (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019: 1102) Fa-reed Zakaria in his well-know paper "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy" warned that illiberal democracy was "a growth industry", and he pro-

[1] V-Dem Project slightly adjusted the chronology of Huntington's second re-verse wave. For them, the second wave of autocratisation took place between 1961 and 1977. (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019: 1102)

phetically noted: “Western liberal democracy might prove to be not the final destination on the democratic road, but just one of many possible exits”. (Zakaria, 1997: 24) While democracy flourished in the 1990s, constitutional liberalism did not. What Zakaria warned about was that, without constitutional liberalism, democracy was not only inadequate “but dangerous, bringing with it the erosion of liberty, the abuse of power, ethnic divisions, and even war.” (Zakaria, 1997: 42-43)

Since 1972, the American non-governmental organisation Freedom House has been preparing annual reports entitled *Freedom in the World*. They categorise all countries worldwide into three groups: free, partly free and not free. That roughly corresponds to the division into liberal democracies, illiberal democracies and autocracies. These reports reflected the rise of liberal democracies in the 1980s and 1990s, and even at the beginning of the 21st century. In 2006, the percentage of the global population that lived in the free world reached its peak (46%). This percentage should not be confused with the number and percentage of UN member states categorised as democracies. Many countries of the Caribbean or Pacific are democracies, and they significantly add to the overall number of global democracies, but they have very small populations.

A huge shift with global implications took place in the Freedom House report for 2020 when India, due to a prolonged rise in violence and discriminatory policies against its Muslim minority, became a partly free country after 20 years of being considered a free country (1999-2019). By that very fact, the number of people living in democracies was almost halved, dropping from 39 to 20 per cent. The latest Freedom House report *Freedom in the World* summarizes a very bleak global outlook for democracies. In global terms, 8 out of 10 citizens do not live in the free world. At the same time, 41.3% of the global population lives in partly free countries and 38.4% in not free countries. (FiW, 2022: 4)

Even the titles of the *Freedom in the World* annual reports are self-explanatory and clearly demonstrate the recent turn towards autocratisation. The last relatively optimistically entitled report was released in 2013: “Democratic Breakthroughs in the Balance”. (FiW 2013) Only two years later, the title was “Discarding Democracy: Return to the Iron Fist”. (FiW 2015) Some of the subsequent titles are self-explanatory: “Democracy in Crisis” (for 2017)”, “Democracy in Retreat” (for 2018), “Democracy under Siege” (for 2020), “The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule” (for 2021). (FiW reports 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022)²

The selection of caricatures in these reports signifies the same trend. In FiW 2018 (for 2017), the cover page of the report shows Achilles bearing the flag of democracy and human rights. His shield can hardly deflect the multitude of arrows directed against him. The knights cowering behind him hold shields emblazoned with the flags of Britain, Germany and

[2] The years in the titles of FiW reports mark the publication year, but the reports always cover the previous year.

France. The American shield is lying on the ground discarded. Behind the Western defenders of democracy sits the then US president Donald Trump, looking at his phone and tweeting. The caricature on the following cover page was even bleaker. Some world leaders have gathered in a circle to burn freedom. While the Saudi prince pours gasoline onto the fire, a group of global leaders, including Vladimir Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Nicolas Maduro, Xi Jinping, Viktor Orban and Donald Trump, is literally fanning the flame. These caricatures graphically highlighted a huge and unexpected novelty: under the presidency of Donald Trump, the key defender of the “free world” – the United States of America, temporarily abandoned its advocacy and promotion of the liberal world. Unsurprisingly, the United States themselves suffered a significant decline in their democracy score, going down from 94 points in FiW for 2010 to 83 points in FiW for 2020. (FiW, 2021: 6) The US democracy was assessed as unstable, and the reasons for downgrading its democracy score included: “the politically distorted health recommendations, partisan infighting, shockingly high and racially disparate coronavirus death rates, and police violence against protesters advocating for racial justice.” (FiW, 2021: 9)

In 2019, Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg, associates of the V-Dem Institute in Gothenburg, published their study on the third wave of autocratisation. In their view, the third wave of autocratisation began in 1994. They identified 32 autocratisation episodes in the first wave, 62 in the second, and 75 in the period 1994-2017. (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019: 1103) Within the third wave of autocratisation, post-communist East European countries had 16 autocratisation episodes, most of which were protracted. The pace of autocratisation in the third wave is slower than in the first two and the autocratisation process more gradual. However, almost all autocratisation episodes affected countries previously classed as democracies. Attacks on democracy do not happen in the same way as during the first two reverse ways, which usually involved coups, foreign invasions and *autogolpes*. Instead, they come through democratic erosion, in which persons in power undermine democratic norms but do not abolish democratic institutions. (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019: 1105) Two years later, the associates of the V-Dem Institute warned: “Since 1994, civil liberties and political rights of one third of the global population have been substantially, and increasingly reduced due to autocratization.” (Boese, Lindberg and Lührmann, 2021: 1207)

Lührmann and Lindberg issued an important warning: “What is especially worrying about this trend [of autocratisation] is that historically, very few autocratization episodes starting in democracies have been stopped short of turning countries into autocracies.” (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019: 1107-08) They were still moderately optimistic in 2019 about the future of democracy: “As it was premature to announce the ‘end of history’ in 1992, it is premature to proclaim the ‘end of democracy’ now.” (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019: 1108)

The Freedom House report for 2021, published in February 2022, is slightly more pessimistic. It identified movements around the world that offer some hope for further democratisation. The authors of this report, Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, warned: “Those countries that have struggled in the space between democracy and authoritarianism, meanwhile, are increasingly tilting toward the latter. The global order is nearing a tipping point, and if democracy’s defenders do not work together to help guarantee freedom for all people, the authoritarian model will prevail.” (Repucci and Slipowitz, 2022: 1)

Selected European and other counties		
Country	Score (100 - the highest)	status
Sweden	100	Free
Germany	94	Free
Slovenia	90	Free
Italy	90	Free
France	89	Free
Greece	87	Free
Croatia	85	Free
Romania	83	Free
USA	83	Free
Bulgaria	79	Free
Hungary	69	Partly free
India	66	Partly free
Ukraine	61	Partly free
Turkey	32	Not free
Russia	19	Not free
Cuba	12	Not free
China	9	Not free
North Korea	3	Not free

Source: *Freedom in the World 2022* (for 2021)

The Western Balkans and the illusion of the fourth wave

The second episode of the third wave of democratisation took place in the Balkans. In Portugal, the Carnation Revolution happened in April 1974. Three months later, the military junta that had ruled Greece for seven years (1967-1974) fell. These two events marked the beginning of the third wave of democratisation. Spain was the following state that became a democracy (in 1977-78). When the Berlin Wall fell (November 1989), expectations were very high that communist Yugoslavia would be among the first to change its political system and become a liberal democracy. Such expectations materialised only in Slovenia. The Wars for Yugoslav Succession (1991-1999) delayed the democratic transition

of the region of the Western Balkans for a whole decade. It was only in 2000 that all the countries that had emerged from former Yugoslavia got their democratically elected governments.

At the beginning of the 21st century, there was quite widespread belief that democracy had very favourable prospects. Some experts were convinced that the fourth wave of democratisation was underway, and that it was going to encompass the countries of former Yugoslavia. The *Routledge Handbook on Democratization*, published in 2012, was a scholarly summary of research conducted in this field. Its editor Jeffrey Haynes entitled his introductory text “Thirty-five years of democratization: the third and fourth waves of democracy in perspective”. (Haynes, 2021: 1-9) The forecast for the countries of the Western Balkans in terms of their democratisation was optimistic. In the first chapter of this handbook, written by the British political scientist Paul G. Lewis, the author optimistically concluded: “So the bulk of Central Europe has democratized successfully, and things are now moving in a positive direction in much of the West Balkans.” (Lewis, 2012: 14)

The prospects outlined in 2012 in *The Routledge Handbook* and retrospective analyses from the vantage point of the early 2020s do not give quite the same results. The second decade of the 21st century brought about quite different outcomes from those that had been anticipated. This led to the gradual abandonment of the term “the fourth wave of democratisation” for the Western Balkans, but the term was also abandoned in global considerations of the process of democratisation. It was replaced by another term that describes the prospects of global democracy in a much bleaker way, and that term is “the third wave of autocratisation.” This wave followed similar patterns that appeared after the first two waves of democratisation. Each wave of democratisation was followed by a wave of autocratisation. In the Western Balkans, one could clearly see democratisation fatigue in 2010, and a wave of autocratisation followed in the second decade of the 21st century.

Depending on one’s standpoint, one could argue that the Wars for Yugoslav Succession (1991-1999) brought about their own wave of autocratisation or at least delayed democratisation in the Western Balkans. But, for the purposes of this analysis, I will focus on the situation in the region since 2010, when clear signs appeared that the previous process of democratisation was undergoing transformation towards autocratisation.

The slow pace of democratisation in ex-Yugoslavia in the first decade of the 21st century

Slovenia began its own process of democratisation after its secession from the Socialist Federal Republic Yugoslavia and its short Ten-Day War with the Yugoslav People’s Army in June-July 1991. In contrast to Slove-

nia, the rest of Yugoslavia was severely affected by the consequences of the dissolution of Yugoslavia and particularly the resulting wars. John R. Lampe noted: "Slovenian political life and its economy were, in addition, free from the cost of reconstituted armies, paramilitary corruption, and unchecked intelligence services that burdened both Serbia and Croatia under the Milošević and Tudjman regimes." (Lampe, 2006: 269) The death of Franjo Tudjman (December 1999), President of Croatia, and the electoral defeat of his regime in Croatia (January 2000), as well as the defeat of the regime of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia in September/October 2000, created huge expectations in terms of democratisation.

The main Freedom House publication *Freedom in the World* (FiW) categorises countries and territories around the world using a scale from 1 (least free) to 100 (totally free), with Scandinavian countries at the top of the list and countries like North Korea and Syria at the bottom. At the beginning of the 21st century, the countries of former Yugoslavia were divided into two groups. Croatia reached the status of a free country already in the FiW report for 2000, and FR Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) in the report for 2001. (FiW, 2001; FiW, 2002) (FYR) Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, could not attain that status and were categorised as partly free. When the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro ended its existence and Montenegro became an independent country (2006), Serbia took over the status of a free country from FR Yugoslavia (FiW, 2007; FiW, 2008: 616; FiW, 2009), and Montenegro was also considered a free country since the FiW report for 2008. (FiW 2008: 480, FiW 2009: 488) Since the proclamation of the independence of Kosovo, Freedom House considered this area partly free. (FiW, 2009)³ To summarize, at the end of the 2000s, the countries of ex-Yugoslavia found themselves in two categories: Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro were ranked free, whereas (FYR) Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo were partly free.

In the FiW report for 2010, Freedom House had a series of complaints regarding the level of democratisation of these countries. Macedonia was assessed as an electoral democracy, with corruption posing a "serious problem" and "increased [political] pressure on the media." Kosovo did not even meet the standards of an electoral democracy, with both corruption and organised crime recognized as serious problems. As for Bosnia and Herzegovina, the report said: "The reform process in Bosnia and Herzegovina stalled and nationalist rhetoric continued to rise in 2010." (FiW, 2011: 92, 365-67, 406)

Another important annual report of Freedom House is entitled *Nations in Transit* (NIT). It is particularly focused on democratic transition and gives more detailed insight and more elaborate classification than the *Freedom in the World* reports. The NIT classification includes five

[3] Freedom House has treated Kosovo since its proclamation of independence as an independent country, but Serbia and many UN member states have not recognised Kosovo's independence by the beginning of 2022.

categories: consolidated democracies, semi-consolidated democracies, transitional governments or hybrid regimes, semi-consolidated autocracies and consolidated autocracies. In geographic terms, the report includes the countries of Central Europe, the former communist countries of the Balkans and the countries of Eurasia. The scores in these reports range from 1 to 7. Consolidated autocracies include countries like Tajikistan or Russia, while consolidated democracies are countries like the Czech Republic and Slovenia. The magic score of democracy is 4.01 because any score above 4 means that a country is indeed a democracy: a semi-consolidated democracy ranges from 4.01 to 5.00 and a consolidated democracy from 5.01 to 7. This means that liberal democracies are divided in these reports into semi-consolidated and consolidated ones.

In the same period, three countries that emerged from former Yugoslavia became liberal democracies, but none of them reached the status of a so-called consolidated democracy. While the Baltic countries, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Hungary relatively quickly reached the status of a consolidated democracy, that did not happen in a single case in the Western Balkans. In the period 2001-2010, the pace of progress was very slow if the whole region of the Western Balkans is analysed. The region progressed by the end of 2010 to an average democracy score of 3.93 points. In other words, on average, it did not even reach the level of semi-consolidated democracy. During the first decade of the 21st century, the region increased its democracy score by 0.28 points on a scale from 1 to 7. (NIT 2002; NIT 2011) In 2010, with that kind of pace, the region needed an additional 34 years to reach the democracy score of a consolidated democracy.

European integration and autocratisation in the Western Balkans

In the 2010s, two EU candidate countries in the region (Montenegro and Serbia) conducted their negotiations by chapters with the EU. Montenegro began accession talks in June 2012 and Serbia in December 2015. Although the concept of the transformative power of the EU in the region of the Western Balkans, and also its EU neighbourhood, was contested recently, (Economides, 2020; Mendelski, 2015; Börzel and Lebanidze, 2017) it could still be argued that this sort of soft power of the EU is more emphasised during chapter negotiations than in any other stage of the accession process, since the period of negotiations includes harmonisation of national laws and policies of candidate countries with EU laws, standards and policies. Therefore, in general terms, the Europeanisation of candidate countries should take place during negotiations by chapters, and this should certainly include the process of democratisation and consolidation of the rule of law.

The stories of Montenegro and Serbia represent rather peculiar case studies in which the transformative power of the EU was reduced during chapter negotiations. Moreover, it was precisely during chapter negotiations and the process of harmonising their laws with the EU that the two states experienced a decline in their democracy rates. Therefore, in the cases of Serbia and Montenegro, the process of autocratisation was concomitant with the process of their negotiations with the EU! O. Komar warned that European “standards” were used in Montenegro “as a shield to cover, or even a mechanism to implement, illiberal actions.” (Komar, 2020: 76)

In the case of Serbia, the concept of stabilitocracy was used to explain its concomitant EU accession and democratic erosion in the period 2015-2021. One should have in mind that the second decade of the 21st century came in the wake of the Greek Debt Crisis that had begun in 2009. The prospects of economic collapses in the Western Balkans coupled with ethnic tensions prompted many Western leaders to accept tacitly, or even endorse openly, a new type of soft authoritarianism that scholars have dubbed stabilitocracy. (Bieber, 2018a; Bieber, 2018b) Vera Stojarova noticed that the EU played “the role of guarantor of stability in the region and has long preferred stability over democracy”. (Stojarova, 2020: 235) Bieber defined the essence of this new type of hybrid state: “Western Balkan stabilitocracies thus combine semi-authoritarian features, while claiming to be reforming democracies and receiving external support, in particular from EU member states, for the sake of the (false) promise of stability.” (Bieber, 2018a: 179)

It became particularly clear that influential Western countries, including Germany and the United States, were growing increasingly willing to prioritize stability over democratisation. (FYR) Macedonia under its Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski (2006-2016) became the first stabilitocracy in the region of the Western Balkans. Although FiW consistently considered (FYR) Macedonia partly free, NIT gave her the rank of a semi-consolidated democracy, and the country lost that rank in the NIT report for 2013. (NIT 2014) The rule of Gruevski was described as a case study of a “combination of strategies by governing elites to maximize institutional and symbolic (discursive) capture” with the aim of consolidating illiberal politics. (Gjuzelov and Ivanovska Hadjievska, 2020: 55)

The European Union had to make concessions to another candidate country in the wider region: Turkey. It never deprived Turkey of its candidate status, in spite of gross violations of the rule of law and human rights in this country. In the period 2012-2016, there was a clear fall in its level of democratisation. Freedom House warned in its report for 2012 that Turkey, under Recep Tayyip Erdogan, underwent huge changes. His long term in power witnessed important reforms, but then hundreds of journalists, academics, opposition party officials and military officers were jailed “in a series of prosecutions aimed at alleged conspiracies against the state and Kurdish organizations.” Turkey became the

world leader in the number of jailed journalists. (FiW 2013: 3) Four years later, *Freedom in the World* assessed that the EU agreement with Turkey concerning refugees “became a deeper source of embarrassment after Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan embraced an unvarnished form of authoritarianism in response to a failed coup attempt in July [2016].” (FiW 2017: 2) In the FiW for 2017, Turkey fell to the lowest rank and was categorised as a not free country. In that way, its “free fall since 2014” reached its peak. (FiW 2018: 7) None of this led to the suspension of its EU candidate status. In March 2019, the European Union even held the 54th session of its EU-Turkey Association Council. (https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/negotiations-status/turkey_en)

Regarding Montenegro and Serbia and their democracy statuses, Montenegro was the first to be downgraded in the Freedom House report for 2015 when it became partly free. (FiW 2016: 19-20) The report has a special section entitled “gridlock in the Balkans.” It was noticed that Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo “all suffered from crippling government dysfunction in 2015”, and for these countries EU accession “remained a distant prospect.” (FiW 2016: 8) However, the Montenegrin progress in EU accession was seen as something that affected Union’s good repute. The EU accession of this state continued “even as the entrenched government of Prime Minister Milo Đukanović sanctioned the harassment of independent media, tarnished the bloc’s image as a purveyor of good governance and democratic norms.” (FiW 2016: 8)

Serbia lost its status in the report for 2018, after 17 years of being considered a free state. (FiW 2019; NIT 2019) The same happened to Hungary. The report stated that the decline in the status of Serbia came “due to deterioration in the conduct of elections, continued attempts by the government and allied media outlets to undermine independent journalists through legal harassment and smear campaigns, and President Aleksandar Vučić’s de facto accumulation of executive powers that conflict with his constitutional role.” (NIT 2019: 13) The same report points out that the presidents of Serbia and Montenegro “continued to consolidate state power around themselves and their cliques, subverting basic standards of good governance and exceeding their assigned constitutional roles.” (FiW 2019: 11)

The third wave of autocratisation: Central Europe and the Western Balkans in the second decade of the 21st century

The third wave of autocratisation affected more or less all countries of the Western Balkans. The enclosed chart of democracy scores of these countries for the period 2010-2021 demonstrates that, in five out of seven countries and entities of the region, democracy scores fell in this

period. The sole exception is North Macedonia, which, in 2017-2020, experienced four consecutive years of increasing its scores from 3.57 to 3.82. Even this kind of increase still left this country within the zone of hybrid regimes. Kosovo even ranked as a semi-consolidated autocracy till 2015. It also demonstrated an increase of democracy scores in 2016-2021 but only reached the level of the worst ranked hybrid regime in the region. Only one country in the region – Croatia – kept the status of a semi-consolidated democracy.

As Croatia is generally not considered a country of the Western Balkans since its EU accession in July 2013, the condition of the region in 2021, in terms of democratisation, may be aptly summarised as follows: six out of six countries and entities are transitional governments or hybrid regimes, and their scores range between 3.25 (Kosovo) and 3.82 (Montenegro and North Macedonia).

State/Entity	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Albania	3.96	3.86	3.75	3.82	3.86	3.86	3.86	3.89	3.89	3.82	3.75	3.75
Bosna and Her.	3.68	3.64	3.61	3.57	3.54	3.50	3.46	3.36	3.32	3.32	3.36	3.29
Croatia	4.36	4.39	4.39	4.32	4.32	4.32	4.29	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25
Kosovo	2.82	2.82	2.75	2.86	2.86	2.93	3.04	3.07	3.11	3.18	3.14	3.25
Montenegro	4.18	4.18	4.18	4.14	4.11	4.07	4.11	4.07	3.93	3.86	3.82	3.82
North Macedonia	4.18	4.11	4.07	4.00	3.93	3.71	3.57	3.64	3.68	3.75	3.82	3.82
Serbia	4.36	4.36	4.36	4.36	4.32	4.25	4.18	4.04	4.00	3.96	3.89	3.79
Average	3.93	3.91	3.87	3.87	3.85	3.81	3.79	3.76	3.74	3.73	3.72	3.71
Median	4.18	4.11	4.07	4.00	3.93	3.86	3.86	3.89	3.89	3.82	3.82	3.79

Source: *Nations in Transit 2020 and 2022* (for 2019 and 2021)

The wave of autocratisation was not limited to the Western Balkans. Somewhat unexpectedly, these countries were joined in this trend by some Central European countries. Two liberal democracies in Central Europe that had excellent democracy ratings and were considered consolidated democracies began to substantially fall in terms of their democracy scores. The distinction that Freedom House has made in its NIT reports between consolidated and semi-consolidated democracies implied that the first group was supposed to be rather resistant to potential autocratic tendencies. The definition of this group of countries has been that they “embody the best policies and practices of liberal democracy, but may face challenges.”

Challenges indeed appeared and turned into clear tendencies to autocratisation in several cases, of which the most striking have been those of Poland and Hungary. (Bozóki and Hegedűs, 2018), In the NIT report for 2020, Freedom House summarised its findings about the two states: “Two countries, Poland and Hungary, stand out for their unparalleled

democratic deterioration over the past decade. Hungary has undergone the biggest decline ever measured in *Nations in Transit*, plummeting through two categorical boundaries to become a Transitional/Hybrid Regime last year. Poland is still categorized as a semi-consolidated democracy, but its decline over the past five years has been steeper than that of Hungary.” (NIT 2021: 2)

The change of democracy scores for the period 2015-2021 demonstrates the highest decline in the case of Poland by 1.14 points, closely followed by Hungary with 1.03. Serbia and Montenegro also experienced a significant decline in this period: to 0.46 in Serbia’s case and to 0.25 in Montenegro’s.

This brings us to the outlook of the Western Balkans and its neighbourhood at the end of 2021. Two former semi-consolidated democracies (Serbia and Montenegro) joined the club of hybrid regimes and partly free countries, which already included three other countries and one entity of the region. The same category of partly free countries includes Hungary and Ukraine, and in the broader neighbourhood there are three more countries ranked not free: Turkey, Belarus and the Russian Federation.

Countries of the Western Balkans in 2021		
State	Score	status
North Macedonia	67	partly free
Montenegro	67	partly free
Albania	67	partly free
Serbia	62	partly free
Kosovo	56	partly free
Bosnia and Herz.	53	partly free

Source: *Freedom in the World 2022* (for 2021)

NIT 2022 has succinctly described this trend: “In this emerging era, liberal democracy no longer prevails as the assumed goal of national political development. Increasingly, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia are headed toward two different destinations: the abyss of full-blown autocracy and the grey zone of hybrid governance, where ostensibly democratic structures belie undemocratic practices.” (NIT 2022: 2) The third wave of autocratisation is also clear when the results of the *Nation in Transit* reports are summarised for the period 2004-2021:

Type of state	number of countries in 2004	%	number of countries in 2021	%
Democracies	14	48.3	10	34.5
Hybrid regimes	4	13.8	11	37.9
Autocracies	11	37.9	8	27.6

Source: NIT 2022, 2.

It is clear that the ongoing erosion of democracy has been particularly favourable for hybrid regimes. One of the reasons that this type of state is so popular is the model of stabilitocracy, which clearly demonstrated to local strongmen in the Western Balkans that the model enabled economic and political co-operation with both the liberal West and the authoritarian countries all around the globe such as China, Russia, Turkey, and the Gulf countries. This created possibilities for economic growth in some of these countries, and the level of foreign direct investments in some of them actually grew concomitantly with the consolidation of local stabilitocracies. In other words, the erosion of democracy was simultaneous with the economic growth generated by both their co-operation with liberal democracies and with Asian and other autocracies. This in turn enabled local semi-dictators to advertise their populist models as very efficient and prosperous.

How to reach democracy without a global wave of democratisation?

The history of the three waves of democratisation clearly suggests that almost all democracies worldwide emerged, and some also re-emerged, during the three waves. It is also obvious that, during the three waves of autocratisation, the chances for a state to be transformed into a democracy were very limited. The third wave of democratisation began in the countries of Southern Europe (Portugal, Greece and Spain) that joined the club of democracies. In the 1990s, the democratic transition of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe followed. This wave had huge support from Western European countries and the United States and was facilitated by the fact that the countries of Central Europe took part in competitive democratisations. Out of the countries that emerged from former Yugoslavia, only Slovenia took advantage of this wave. Other countries were impacted by the Wars for Yugoslav Succession and had a decade of delayed democratic transition (1991-2000). Even Croatia never joined the club of consolidated democracies, and this was also a legacy of the wars from the 1990s. The first decade of the 21st century witnessed clear democratic progress in the Western Balkans, but this progress was not as rapid and efficient as its proponents hoped it would be. Since approximately 2010, democracy has been in crisis in the West-

ern Balkans, and since 2015 one can speak of a wave of autocratisation in Central Europe as well.

This wave of autocratisation is characterised, both globally and regionally, by the erosion of democracy and obstructions of institutions to the point of rendering them meaningless. Another feature is the extreme preponderance of executive power, which may even lie in the hands of politicians who do not have constitutionally defined dominant executive powers, like in Serbia, but who nonetheless exercise such powers. Institutions during the third reverse way continue to exist, but they are intentionally obstructed with the aim of making them dysfunctional. (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019: 1104-05, 1108) The fact that those institutions continue to survive even as dysfunctional entities could later facilitate efforts to reverse the wave and restart democratisation. The case of North Macedonia demonstrates such possibilities.

In this respect, the key dilemma has remained how to encourage a regional wave of democratisation amid global autocratisation, and whether regional democratisation amid opposite global trends is viable at all. In the 1990s, Central European countries displayed competitive democratisation; in the 2010s, the countries of the Western Balkans seemed to compete in stabilitocratisation. Democratisation meant consolidation of the rule of law, independent judiciary, free and fair elections, free media and market reforms. Stabilitocratisation eliminated the rule of law, independent judiciary and free media from key words and has instead preached economic growth and higher salaries and pensions. One cannot deny that the stabilitocratic keywords have strong popular appeal among the electorate, especially if these governments manage to deliver at least some of the promised results. Another advantage of stabilitocracies in the Western Balkans is that they should, by definition, be able to provide local stability and should be ready to participate in European efforts to preserve stability in the region. Amidst wars or migrant crises in their neighbourhood, stability may still be an important aim even for liberal external actors, such as the European Union or the United States.

A regional wave of democratisation cannot be created on the basis of optional participation of countries of the region in this process. It will be possible only if all, or almost all, countries and entities become ready to participate in it. The external endorsement of the EU and the United States would be more than helpful and EU conditionality may give a further impulse. This impulse may be severely curtailed if what Spyros Economides calls enlargement resistance remains an important feature in major EU countries, particularly in a situation when “enlargement is not a central issue for the EU”. (Economides, 2020: 6)

External and internal factors and possible new directions

The emergence of the concept of stabilocracy as a scholarly attempt to describe and explain contemporary trends in the Western Balkans signalled that there was a mixture of external and internal causes in the process of the erosion of democracy in the region. Internal factors, above all weak institutions, allowed stabilocrats to further erode them.

However, the role of external actors, such as China and Russia, was also identified. The NIT report for 2019 includes “a snapshot of Chinese government influence,” and identifies three ways in which China influences local governments: 1. technology/surveillance, 2. debt diplomacy, and 3. influence campaigns. In six countries at least two ways of Chinese influence were detected. These countries were: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Tajikistan. (NIT 2020: 10-11) As we can see, four out of the six cases of Chinese substantial influence were detected in the Western Balkans. The authoritarian and totalitarian models of Russia and China have served as a kind of inspiration to hybrid regimes and autocracies from Hungary to Turkey, and all around the Western Balkans. In addition to the authoritarian cultural transfer, even liberal external actors, including the European Union and the United States, supported the rise and consolidation of local stabilocracies.

What was particularly worrying for external liberal actors was that their prestige was affected concomitantly with the rise of the influence of external illiberal actors in the Western Balkans. Freedom House openly criticised the role of the EU in Turkey in its FiW report and also the role of the Union in Montenegro in its NIT report. In the NIT report for 2019, Freedom House pointed out: “The increased presence of authoritarian powers like Russia, China, and Turkey in the region has spurred some reengagement by the United States, but it too has increasingly focused on backroom deals, deemphasizing any shared commitment to democracy.” (NIT 2020: 2) The role of the European Union is increasingly seen critically, as the concept of stabilocracy demonstrates. Some authors even went so far as to call the impact of the EU on the development of the rule of law in Southeastern Europe “pathological”. (Mendelski, 2015) There is, however, no other external relevant actor that could be more interested in the democratisation of the region than the EU.

Since 1999, various regional initiatives were designed by the EU to promote reconciliation and regional co-operation in the Western Balkans. In spite of EU enlargement fatigue and resistance, one would expect the Union to be involved in regional efforts for democratisation, not only due to its own preference for liberal values but also as a way to counterbalance the influence of illiberal international actors. That kind of approach could encourage a regional wave of democratisation and stop any further erosion of local institutions. To do this, the European

Union should not replace the keywords associated with stabilitocracy with the keywords associated with democratisation but should rather fuse all of them. In other words, the Union should add economic growth as one of its key goals for the countries of the Western Balkans and design programmes that would enhance economic development. This kind of approach would closely associate democratisation and economic growth and limit space for local populism and could also be an effective way to block the influence of external illiberal actors.

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Abbreviations:

FiW - *Freedom in the World*

NIT - *Nations in Transit*