Introduction to the Issue: “Stable Democratic Institutions in Spite of Weak Popular Support – A Comparison of the Southeast European Democracies”

Dieter Segert and Heinz Faßmann
University of Vienna

Motivation

All societies in the Balkans experienced fundamental crises and the breakdown of the social and political order during the last two to three decades. Further changes differed among the countries: all experienced parallel transformation processes, but some suffered from war while others managed to avoid violent political conflict. The wars resulted in the loss of people and wealth, and heavily destroyed the respective economies (Džihić et al. 2012: 92). All transformation societies had high unemployment levels of up to 40 percent (See Table 1). Some countries had a very high rate of emigration: between 20 to 40 percent of the original population of Albania, Macedonia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina lived for some time or permanently outside of the region. These emigrants are mostly better-educated than their average compatriots. In some countries such as Albania and Bulgaria, most university graduates emigrated (IOM 2007–2008).

The following collection of analyses focuses on two questions: What is the impact of these extreme social burdens on democracy and social stability? And, has a specific type of democracy in the region emerged?

In considering these topics issue, we must cope with a certain level of theoretical ignorance towards economic influences on democratic regimes. Empirical analysis of democratization rarely includes the interaction between economics and politics. The question arises: which theoretical perspective can

---

1) We are thankful for the critical remarks on a first version of our paper by Tina Olteanu and Irena Ristić.
illuminate the relevant social environment of politics? The widespread “transition to democracy” approach has intentionally neglected every possible non-political cause of political change (cf. Carothers 2002: 8). Although conceptions such as Offe’s “dilemma of simultaneity” (1991) or Crouch’s “post-democracy” (2008: 70) indeed stress the importance of these interactions, they are not suitable for empirical research. The conception of a consolidated democracy either argues only by (political) institutions, (political) actors, and (political) culture (Merkel 2007, 415–416). The attempt of some modernization approaches to measure the success of democratization as dependent on a specific level of economic activity also seems too static. Merkel’s conception of the embedding of a democratic regime marks a certain degree of social justice as a precondition, but does not elaborate on the specific influences of such a factor (Merkel 2010: 30, cf. Figure 2 on p. 31). In another place in his book, however, we can find a clue: Concerning the stability of a political system, he refers to Easton’s concept of needed support (Merkel 2010: 55–56). This concept can also be helpful for our investigation. Easton has differentiated between specific and diffuse support (1965). Each political system needs both kinds of support. What happens if, over the long term, a system’s economic and social outputs are much below the population’s expectations? Could we conclude that the specific support of a political order could be damaged in that case? This is an issue we will discuss.

A second preliminary note: We should consider two distinctive features of the post-socialist societal changes in most of the post-Yugoslav countries. Firstly, the radical nature of the change generally stemmed from manifold parallel changes that involved state building and wars. It has resulted in a sharp economic decline comparable only with the years after the global economic crisis in 1929. Additionally, the economic results had a high level of inequity. As indicated by our poll in Serbia, the respective societies have a widely spread perception of a deep divide between winners and losers. Secondly, the systemic change had evoked extremely big hopes in many countries of the region. That was partly determined by the ideological legitimation

2) What we really know on the relationship between economic and political changes, if we could state with this kind of research: “Indeed we have found that once a country is sufficiently wealthy, with per capita income more than $6000 a year, democracy is certain to survive, come hell or high water” (Przeworski et al 1996: 49).

3) This is a general remark that should be further differentiated. In some countries of the region such as Serbia and Macedonia the expectations concerning the adaptation towards Western capitalism were less developed than in East Central Europe.