

## **Stabilocracy. The unexpected result of security agendas in the Western Balkans**

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**Abstract:** *The text analyses the process of authoritarian populism building, which is the unexpected result in most Western Balkan countries stemming partly from double standards applied in the region by the EU and NATO bureaucrats and decision makers in the process of enlargement of the EU and NATO. The EU's obsession with stability has led it to lose sight of the rule of law and liberal democratic standards as basic criteria for enlargement or relegated them to mere rhetoric. Future outcomes are uncertain.*

**Keywords:** *Stabilocracy, authoritarian populism, rule of law, fantasies, nationalism.*

**Sommario:** *Il testo analizza il processo di costruzione del populismo autoritario che è il risultato inatteso nella maggior parte dei paesi dei Balcani Occidentali derivanti in parte dai duplici standards applicati nella regione dai burocrati dell'UE e della NATO e dai decisori nel processo di allargamento dell'UE e della NATO. L'ossessione dell'UE sulla stabilità l'ha portata a perdere di vista dello stato di diritto e degli standards liberal-democratici come criteri base per l'allargamento o li ha relegati a mera retorica. Per questo i risultati futuri sono incerti.*

**Parole chiave:** *Stabilcrazia, populismo autoritario, stato di diritto, fantasie, nazionalismo.*

### **Introduction**

I will start with the thesis that *populistic authoritarianism* is unfortunately the predominant tendency in illiberal countries in transition in the Western Balkans

today. This ideology has been predominantly formulated around *right-wing defensive-protective political utopias and emotions*, producing in political systems a deep anti-individualistic approach to human rights, and ethno-cultural-organic-collective fantasies, all with authoritarian consequences in politics.

The second line of analysis concerns the *structures of those emotions and fantasies*, their attempt to construct an ideology of the “lost object” (Laclau, Žižek) and the DRIVE to regain that lost object as an ultimate achievement. Also considered are those who use this ideology to justify power grabs and seek legitimacy for an authoritarian political project (which I roughly equate to dictatorship, but are more precisely populist authoritarian systems).

The third thesis regards an external factor of this development which I call the use of double standards by the international network of experts and decision making centres responsible for the accession process of these countries to the EU and NATO and the monitoring of that process.

### **Functioning of the populist emotional “screen”**

The strength of the national connection among individuals (especially in the illiberal societies of post-communism and the transition to democracy) becomes ideologically equated with the position of a victim of a conspiracy (as Wendy Brown would say: a cultivated wound-in-identity and the development of a compensatory mechanism...).

Nationalism is always a buffer for the shocks that social and economic imbalances create. Not directly, but always through the mythology of a conspiracy. In this narrative ethnic unity and the fantasy of a stable, homogeneous social body are always “disrupted” by some enemies that are synonymous with the situation of imbalance, contradiction, laceration and devastating tensions, which prevent unity. National myths always serve to organise a community, and are brought to bear in the face of any or external or internal threats. In that sense, nationalism is always in need of “the other”, hence it is essentially relational. It is mostly in the form of qualifications, networks of prejudice and the demonisation of others, especially by means of a concept that Žižek introduces: the theft of our “pleasure-in-the-nation” committed by others.

The complex populist, nationalistic dialectic is based on the assumption that the desire of each generation is to try to heal the metaphorical castration of the nation and restore its lost completeness.

I suggest that the line of desires, the lost object and search for it, the production of scapegoats (the stealers of our enjoyment) – are embodied in phantasmatic narrative: how the fantasy of national unity links the socio-symbolic field and particularly political institutions and mobilisation with individuals' abiding emotions and affections. The ideology of nationalism here derives its force from the logic of fantasy and the way this structures our relationship with enjoyment. We could call this the Politics of Emotions.

I would consider three levels of at which populism functions: emotional, ideological, mobilization.

At the *first level*, is the formation of the ideology of identity, which needs to be regenerated, persistently secured and based on a false mythology and fake memory pushed to the level of a *drive* for an “ideology of the lost object” (full organic national unity). This level is supported by the promising fantasy of harmonious resolution of social antagonism or possibility of rebirth, regaining lost national unity if only we can eliminate the obstacles to the fulfilment of that fantasy (migrants, “bad” ethnic minorities, gays or “the usual suspects”). We will call that a “*beatific fantasy*”.

The *second level* is composed of activities or political mobilisation that form a so-called political screen which presents the concept of The Master (Alain Badiou, this level is that of constituting a populist leadership). This political screen shows what we want to accomplish and what we want to be, although this screen embodies not only the secret desires of a nation, but also the anxieties of the previous one. This political screen serves to actualize the intrusive establishment of the Big Other, the sovereign of the symbolic order in politics (or in Laclauian terms, filling the place of the “empty signifier” with values of the new hegemony). This level also marks the first actualization of the *conflict situation with others* who are perceived as those stealing our enjoyment. This sort of contact can be defined as *paranoiac fantasy*. It should be borne in mind that it is directly related to hopes that a “stolen pleasure” can be recovered only through conflict with and the destruction of the ones marked as “others” (the threat to our fantasy). This is a process of generating scapegoats.

The *third level* is dedicated to *the action of abrogation of political pluralism – as an obstacle* to the establishment of the organic unity of the nation, that is to say establishing an authoritarian regime. Again, populist politics does not address problems (let alone solve them). Rather, it *radically redefines their status* and symbolically mediates them. It creates internal boundaries, new divides – what is known as the internal periphery. And questions are framed in terms of Carl Schmitt's categories whereby political antagonism is shifted, de-centred and redirected towards eliminating the antagonistic nature of politics as such. Political antagonism from inside is directed towards the border, the edge of the national body – towards “the others”, the enemy. This is where the main battle is being set up. It should be borne in mind what creates the special cruelty of the populist boot directed at the “enemy within” (all the threats – from spies, to bad ethnic groups and other infiltrators that symbolically jeopardise the phantasmal unity of the people). According to Carl Schmitt the purpose of outside enemies is to unite the nation within. This outside enemy is marked as a “good enemy”, unlike the enemy within which is considered a “bad enemy” (actually fellow citizens of different political opinions or classes). This implies first subordinating all conflict to the imperative of national unity, and then establishing, whenever necessary, a “state of exception” through which “internal enemies” can be identified and eliminated, or at least forcibly brought into unanimity (Ethien Balibar).

While the “clash with the external” enemy remains in the realm of the symbolic and propaganda, the clash with the “internal bad enemy” is very real and cruel. Records of political persecution and repression of their citizens in transitional populist authoritarian regimes are long and abundant.

Taking a more detailed look at these operations, we could say that the legitimate core and political strength of authoritarian populism and dictatorship is not only the usurpation and dismissal of democratic institutions, but an ideology created upon xenophobia and nationalism “searching for the lost object of desire” (national unity, the organic unity of the nation and hatred of the radical other). This drive derives firstly from a desire for the return of the lost object (extending Lacan one could say towards a Dead drive). Secondly from the libidinal economy of enjoying defeat – the inability to regain the fantasised unity (the lost object never returns because it never existed in the first place). Thirdly, *faith in a political party that promises* (regardless of its constant

failures to deliver it) to restore this unity or fight for it – these are the substantive elements of the ideology of a populist authoritarian regime.

Its treatment of history corresponds to Hegel's characterisation in that it writes, or rather rewrites, history from the perspective of the present, manipulating it to find historical roots of and the "necessity" for current relations. It retroactively repudiates previous relations and gives legitimacy to the new dominant power relationships. When something new appears, this new factor retrospectively constructs its historical "necessity". There are never "bare facts"; invariably these narratives "have already been set by us." Tradition is tradition only if it is established by us. A fundamental paradox of the rediscovery of tradition, returning to the roots and similar policies to create a national identity is that they are tautological and self-referential, they reveal themselves as already-present-in-tradition! When Hegel uses the word "oblivion" (*docta ignorantia*), he does it in a way to enable absolute knowledge to absorb the essence of historical truth, to get rid of the layers of historical memory, which are not "essential". Sometimes I think that such an overlap of memory and forgetting the "phenomenal self" is needed for the Macedonians to be able to extract from themselves their real essence as a modern European nation.<sup>1</sup>

This retroactive memory/oblivion is always ideological and always builds and is built upon the libidinal economy of the nation (that is the contribution of Lacan and Žižek in this story). It is not expressed through neutral, scrupulous scientific analysis, but always and without exception through the fantasies of the nation. Fantasies about the trauma of the break-up with the former imaginary unity (which never actually existed), in the divisions and fighting that followed and the constant desire to rebuild it and to dream one's own dreams. Fantasy is a network of meanings through which a social content, object or person is shown to us as the object of our desire or as an obstacle to satisfying it. It explains why our fundamental desire (achieving primordial unity, final harmony) cannot be reached and so offers us alternatives, compensations through the pleasure principle. It offers us sublimation, suppression, transgression; it keeps open the possibility of satisfaction and explains why the

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<sup>1</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History, Philosophy of Rights, Philosophy of Mind*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992; *Philosophy of Religion*, Clarendon Press, 2007.

basic frustration of not being able to be completely pleased means that satisfaction is actually unattainable. Basically, this is what Lacan implies when he says that fantasy is the ultimate leverage for reality and that reality is stabilised when framed in a fantasy (which controls the influence of the chaos of the REAL), and, most radically, that fantasy constitutes reality, not vice-versa, and that we perceive reality only through the filter of fantasy.

Every historical rewriting (Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Turkey etc.) is by definition non-European, intended to be a pure and heroic civilization, practically based on nihilism from nihilism, *ab novo*. These national stories take the place of discourse on Europe (to which, ironically, these states have applied for membership).

In Erdogan's case in Turkey this takes the form of skipping the Ataturk period of recent history and entering the famous period of the sultans (the year of the fall of Constantinople is the golden number embodied in all parameters of the new Taksim architectural reconstruction).

For Orban in Hungary it bypassing the Habsburg Empire to focus on the "famous" Asiatic origin of Hungarian tribes and their four leaders who correspond to the European spaces which today make up Hungary.

In the Macedonian case it a journey to the ancient state of Macedonia and Alexander the Great.

In the Serbian rewriting of history the image of the Serbs is a people of heaven which always wins wars and loses in peace.

## **Conclusions**

When for some reason you tolerate (security before democracy, in-state security considered to be democracy) abuse of the rule of law (Helsinki principles, the first basket of conditions for approaching EU accession) you will be in serious trouble. In the long term you will lose security and also democracy.

Secondly, with ideology of the authoritarian populist system you will have nothing but nationalism controlled and exploited by new generations of authoritarian leaders. They will allow ethnic minorities to remain – but under their thumb in order to blackmail international actors by making it appear that only they (authoritarians) can guarantee the prevention of ethnic conflicts.

The finally established dictatorship of this political project is difficult to topple with institutions and procedures typical of democracies. These institutions are gone, colonised from within by the new populist people (elections, the judiciary and public administration).

If the system is lucky enough to be of importance to the wider international community (for whatever reason) as Macedonia has proved to be, then the road to change is long and difficult and must be in some way original. Such a path completely bypasses all necessary existing institutions or applies heavy pressure on them from an unusual political front made of international actors (the EU and the US in the case of Macedonia), part of the liberal political opposition, some of the media, an active civil sector and part of the judiciary system (who need a lot of help to stand on their own feet for minimal resistance to the dictatorship).

In the case of Macedonia this is the creation of a parallel prosecution system (and perhaps a separate judicial council) so the period of transitional justice can form the basis for a new democratic beginning (prosecuting corruption – profiling cases and criminal wiretapping).

Some critical tuning will have to be applied in a strategy and its implementation of the enlargement process (EU and NATO). There is no panacea strategy but some critical improvement is necessary.

The first thing to do is insist on the rule of law without any rotten compromises. The Helsinki principles is not only the first but could also be the final obligation that candidate countries have to fulfil. That process must be closely monitored.

Secondly, an independent judiciary and freedom of expression are the bare minimum of critical hot-spots to be monitored.

Thirdly, there must be a readiness to “blackmail” candidate countries by withholding aid if they do not deliver results on those hot-spots. Be ready to get involved in the process in such countries with soft arbitrage, expert help and even meddling in some critical solutions.

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