

## Book Review: Democratic Institutions and Authoritarian Rule in South East Europe

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Two decades on from the strife that plagued the former Yugoslavia, many see the widening of EU membership into Southeast Europe as signifying the rise of stable and functioning democracy in the region. In ***Democratic Institutions and Authoritarian Rule in South East Europe***, **Danijela Dolenec** takes issue with this view, making comparisons with the far more democratically stable countries of Central Europe. **Anne Corbett** commends the book's in-depth examination of the political structural legacies which have led to 'locked in' authoritarianism in much of Southeast Europe.

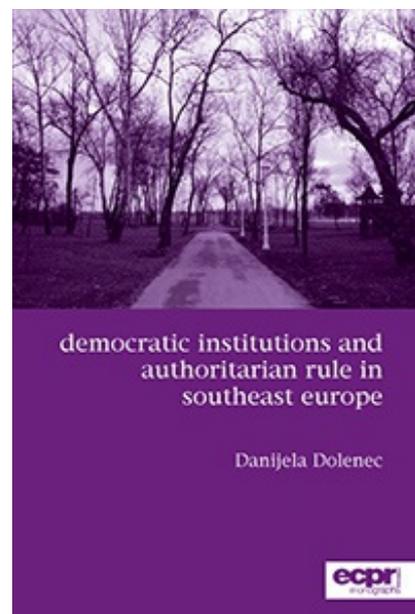


**Democratic Institutions and Authoritarian Rule in South East Europe. Danijela Dolenec. ECPR Press. May 2013.**

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Though historically strife-ridden, Europe is now a continent of democratic states. Even the Croatian and Serbian states which grew out of the former Yugoslavia – and which in the 1990s masterminded ethnic murder and massacres in Bosnia – have been engaged for some time in structured relations with the EU. In July of this year Croatia became the 28<sup>th</sup> EU member state.

These developments would seem to be powerful symbols of a democratisation process undertaken with the EU's help, following the fall of communism. Or are they? A new methodologically and empirically sophisticated study, which will be of immediate interest to Southeast Europe specialists and political theorists more generally, suggests optimism is out of order. In the countries of Southeast Europe (SEE) – Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Romania and Serbia – in contrast to those of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) – the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia – anti-democratic practice has become embedded. Further democratisation efforts are not only stalling, in some cases they are slipping back. In *Democratic Institutions and Authoritarian Rule in South East Europe*, [Danijela Dolenec](#), a young Croatian scholar, administers a serious jolt to those who think that widening EU membership implies progress towards a stable functioning democracy in which the rule of law is upheld and citizens' rights respected.



This enriching study framed in the historical institutionalism tradition of [Theda Skocpol](#), starts from the theoretical assumption that structural conditions shape the constraints which limit the scope for political action in relation to subsequent events. The case is illustrated here by the evidence of authoritarian governance practice from the 1990s coalescing over the subsequent 20 years into obstacles which may prove lasting to democratisation in Southeast Europe. The biggest of the constraining legacies is the weak system of law. This contrast with the situation of CEE countries – though is Hungary now proving an exception? In Dolenec's account, until 2010 these countries had a distinctly more positive record for tackling corruption and generally upholding the law, whether in respect of civil liberties and the need for an independent judiciary.

The initial part of Dolenc's study compares the 14 states formerly operating under communist regimes of both the CEE and SEE, through excluding the contested Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina established in 1995. Despite the different levels of democratisation in the two groups there is no clear CEE/SEE split on proxies for democracy such as attitudes to life satisfaction, libertarian sexual attitudes, interpersonal trust and protest potential (religion may be a more potent influence). Ethnic diversity does not appear to have causal implications for democratisation. Most of the 14 states, bar Poland, Hungary and Albania, have ethnically diverse populations; their trajectories of democratisation are divergent. Within SEE itself, even membership of the EU, has not changed a pattern of low-level democratic practice as the two states involved in violent conflict. Bulgaria has regressed almost since the day it joined the EU.

Dolenc's framing of her argument in historical institutionalist terms emphasises the political structural legacies that preceded modernisation, and the potential turning points over time provoked by contingent factors. Building on insights from the theoretical literature of modernisation that emphasises party system dynamics, and that on the role of conflict and impact on state building, she gives a three stage argument to explain how and why authoritarian rule became embedded in SEE states unlike those of the CEE.

The first



Parliament welcomes Croatia to the EU with a special flag ceremony at the entrance of the EP in Strasbourg. Credit: [European Union 2013 – European Parliament](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

step, the 14 country comparison, confirms the theoretical predictions that the trajectory of democratisation will be influenced by levels of socio-economic development, communist regime type as measured by levels of independence of bureaucracies and citizens' value orientations. Striking findings are the lack of relationship across the CEE and SEE between citizens' expectations of democracy and the actual democratisation of a regime; but the difference between the SEE and CEE in respect to the law is marked. SEE countries all have weak systems.

The second analytic step relates to the significance of political choice. Dolenc examines political party dynamics in the period 1990-2000, extending [Schimmelfennig's](#) work on the distinction between political party competition, where opposition parties can take power, and political party constellations where one-party rule is embedded, and Kitschelt's typology of communist regimes showing up major differences in relation to socio-economic development and state capacity. In both cases, the SEE countries fall into the least democratised category.

In a third step, Dolenc takes the cases of Croatia and Serbia, to understand not only why authoritarian one-party rule became embedded after democratic structures had been formally brought into existence, but also the impact of violent conflict. She shows conflict as strengthening already strong tendencies to authoritarianism, and delaying EU action. She argues that what might have been a turning point in fact was an example of path dependence. Conflict strengthened pre-existing tendencies to authoritarianism strong, blocking the progress towards a stronger system of law and the alternance of power evolving elsewhere.

Three mechanisms have locked in authoritarianism. These are the legacy of the personalisation of power, epitomised by Franjo Tuđman in Croatia, who died before he could be indicted on war crimes, and Slobodan Milošević in Serbia who died during his war crimes trial; the legacy of political power merged with economic power with the transition to a capitalist economy; and the consequential huge wealth of the elite. In Croatia and Serbia that opened up vast opportunities for abuse of power in terms of insider deals and widespread corruption as already analysed in Bulgaria and other parts of the SEE.

Dolenc's conclusion is that moving the democratisation process forward requires domestic societal forces, not the external forces of the EU. 'Political change happens gradually through the strengthening of independent social spheres, which demand fair treatment from the state and grow into endogenous sources of opposition' and hence offer the possibility of the alternance of power. And that won't happen until political elite accepts restraint.

My only quibble is with the conclusion. In the higher education sector where my European research interests lie, I regularly meet intelligent, ambitious, and apparently ethical students, researchers, and bureaucrats from the SEE countries. In my experience they have brought a fresh epistemic energy into EU and other forums. They are adept at using the wider stage brought about by European or international education experience. So I read the book with a maybe irrational hope that more change is in store than the Dolenc analysis assumes, and that some of it will come from peer learning – in other words mixed endogenous and exogenous experience.

But that is not to criticise the overall effort. The author should be congratulated for her contribution to SEE studies and for the intellectually wider achievement of providing a sharp and replicable way to understanding the extent to which European diversity is shaped by national choices which, in some parts of the continent, still pit authoritarianism against democracy by politically constraining the legal system.

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