West is best: How 'stabilitocracy' undermines democracy building in the Balkans

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Recent months have seen unrest in Macedonia, with a violent protest at the country's parliament, while other countries in the Balkans such as Montenegro have also witnessed large anti-government protests. **Srđa Pavlović** *argues that the West's approach to the Balkans has suffered from what he terms 'stabilitocracy', with the EU and United States backing governments that promise stability, but have undermined the establishment of democracy. He argues that if such an approach continues, it will likely produce anything but stability for the region.*

Former Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski at a European People's Party summit. Credits: EPP (CC BY 2.0)

Just before last Christmas I wrote for this blog on the political situation in Montenegro and coined the term *stabilitocracy*, labeling the manner in which the West approached the Balkans in general, and Montenegro in particular. Since then, and to my delight, others have adopted this term and applied it in a broader fashion. I wish to take this opportunity to elaborate further on my understanding of the term and express my agreement with its broad application.

The core value of *stabilitocracy* is a conviction that protecting and promoting western interests is paramount. It is, however, a two-way street. Regimes which understand that core conviction and are willing to protect and sustain western geo-political, security, military, economic, or energy related interests in a given country are usually spared the wrath of the great powers such as the United States, the UK, or the European Union. Local autocrats, therefore, can do whatever suits their needs in their private domains. Any criticism directed towards them is usually dismissed as either sour grapes from a political loser or an attempt by retrograde undemocratic political forces to gain the upper hand.

As the examples of Montenegro, Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo clearly demonstrate, the West sees such governments as imperfect but still functional and useful structures. They are treated as damaged goods that show great potential, which needs further nurturing and support. Judging by either the silence of the West or its rather mild criticism of those states, one would think their governments are democratic, their judiciaries independent and impartial, while their elections are fair, free, and transparent. So, for both partners in the *stabilitocracy* game, life is about achieving and maintaining control, no matter what. For the rest of us mere mortals, it is about the hypocrisy of international politics. History and recent events confirm that such a relationship ends only when the West realises its interests in a given country or region are either poorly served by an old partner or when a new and more promising prospect appears on the political horizon.

The responsibility for the various outcomes of this political discourse should be shared between a given local autocrat and his enablers in the West. The two sides feed off each other in a mutually beneficial and profitable relationship. This type of relationship between the West and the rest, has marked the political life in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, and the Balkans over the past three decades.

Stabilitocracy enables the West to maintain its rhetoric of promoting democracy, free, fair, and transparent elections, an independent judiciary, a strong parliament, the rule of law, the protection of human rights, and the need to fight against corruption and organised crime. At the same time, it enables the local partner to establish a façade democracy while diminishing the role of parliament, holding unfair elections, criminalising the local political arena, assuming dictatorial powers, enacting predatory laws aimed at eliminating political competition, and stifling dissent as well as plundering a country's resources for the benefit of political leaders and their closest associates.

Still, the two sides should not evenly share the responsibility for such outcomes. While there is no innocent or naïve partner in this relationship, it is always the West setting the agenda, determining the nature of the relationship and the complexity of a given *stablitocracy* scenario because it acts from the position of power.

Even though this brief note is about *stabilitocracy* in the Balkan context, it is important to stress that its applications transcend geographical boundaries as well as cultural, economic, political, and religious frameworks. Its application by the successive U.S. administrations throughout the twentieth century is a case in point. As a guiding principle of foreign policy and a political discourse to which western democracies have subscribed since the end of the Second World War, *stabilitocracy* has a long and bloody history.

The last century was littered with the political and physical corpses of former allies and so-called "partners for dialogue." One only needs to recall Chile during Pinochet, Juan Peron's Argentina, Iran during the reign of Reza Pahlavi, and the Iraq of Saddam Hussein, as well as a host of dictators in the Maghreb, to illustrate the devastating effect of *stabilitocracy* as a guiding principle of foreign policy. To remain within the Balkan frame of reference, it might be worth noting that for some time in the early 1990s, the Serbian leader, Slobodan Milošević, was one such partner before he ended up accused of war crimes in The Hague. He was quickly replaced by Montenegro's Milo Đukanović, and as of late, Serbia's Aleksandar Vučić.

As a guiding principle of western foreign policy in the Balkans, *stabilitocracy* produces ever greater hardship and further radicalises political and social spaces. The disconnect between the Western rhetoric of democratisation, the rule of law, and respect for the institutions of the state, and the local reality of authoritarian rule and corruption is indeed glaring. It is also rather discouraging for all those who genuinely desire to democratise their countries. The end result is often a deep suspicion, if not a complete dismissal of integrative processes, and a lack of confidence in the institutions of the EU and NATO in particular.

Many argue that the governments of powerful states have always favoured stability over everything else and that the current Balkan conundrum is nothing new. While it is true that stability above everything else has always been an important consideration for any state, I am not sure if it was paramount for great powers. I believe that approaching it as an absolute priority gives a false sense of hope and certainly a false sense of security and stability.

We can see now that *stabilitocracy*, as a rule, produces everything but stability and security. More often than not, it legitimises the existing animosity towards the West and helps new resentment emerge and thrive where there was none. Neither the Balkans, nor any other country or region can offer a new revolutionary insight into the inner workings of *stabilitocracy*. The events in the Balkans grab media attention because of ingrained stereotypes about the region and its peoples, and also because we are witnessing the actual unravelling of the *stabilitocracy* discourse and foreign policy practice in one of the more volatile regions of Europe.

There is also talk about the proverbial Balkan powder keg and threats of a possible armed conflict. While I am somewhat less sceptical about the willingness of political elites to resort to war in order to secure their stay in power, I find it difficult to believe that local political elites have sufficient resources to start a new war. They might, and they often do, inspire various radical groups to create incidents and may even incite violence at a local level. Still, the bellicose rhetoric of politicians seems more posturing than anything else.

In terms of the capacity for a *stabilitocracy* to function through a mutually beneficial relationship, both sides (the West, and local autocrats) benefit from it. On the one hand, the talk about "war clouds" in the Balkans scares the population into submission and silences the opposition to the autocratic rule of local western-supported strongmen. The western policy makers, on the other hand, start obsessing over new war games against their arch nemesis, Russia. Both are repeating the mantra about "stability above everything else." I see it as a New Cold War narrative, and as the instrumentalising of stereotypes for two political purposes: militarising foreign policy and the securitising of international relations.

In Macedonia, blood is being spilled in the parliament. Armed and masked thugs beat up opposition MPs and journalists while shouting nationalist slogans and wrapping themselves up in the Macedonian flag. Here, following fraudulent elections and a prolonged crisis, we have the former prime minister, who had in the past received strong support from the EU and was its "partner for dialogue," trying to reassert himself by instrumentalising nationalism and fear of diversity. Nikola Gruevski is being accused by the opposition leader Zaev of unleashing atavistic passions of nationalism upon his political adversaries. In fairness to him, however, it is also possible that Gruevski simply lost control over his political minions, if he ever had any real control over them to begin with. Either way, it looks as if we are about to see the typical products of the *stabilitocracy* game: political chaos, uncertainty, political radicalisation, and the absence of any inkling of stability in the country.

Former US Secretary Kerry with Montenegro's Milo Đukanović. Credits:US Department of State (public domain)

In Montenegro, we have the same person, Milo Đukanović, occupying the highest offices in the land – prime minister, and president – since 1989! Since parting ways with Slobodan Milošević in 1997, Đukanović has been the alpha and omega of Montenegrin politics, and has created a private state characterised by endemic corruption, disregard for the rule of law, the plundering of resources, and the construction of omnipotent security apparatus. Moreover, Montenegro remains an attractive investment destination for Russian oligarchs.

The country is deeply divided along ethnic and religious lines, and over Montenegro's membership of both the EU and NATO. The opposition parties have been boycotting the parliament. Meanwhile, street protests over the country's harsh economic situation are daily features of life. Still, the EU administration maintains that Montenegro is the so-called "Balkan success story." The U.S. officials continue to sing the praises of the government in Podgorica and its resolve to remain committed to so-called Euro-Atlantic integrations.

It is as if the West – both the EU and the United States – remains willfully blind to the clearly visible markers of a deep economic, political, and constitutional crisis. That is *stabilitocracy* at its best. I am afraid that the thought of a "Macedonian scenario" playing out in Montenegro in the coming months might not be a far-fetched one, after all.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the author

Srđa Pavlović – *University of Alberta*
Srđa Pavlović teaches modern European and Balkan history at the University of Alberta (Edmonton, Canada) and is a research associate with the Wirth Institute for Austrian and Central European Studies. He is a founding member of the Movement for Changes (Montenegro) and the author of Balkan Anschluss (Purdue University Press, 2008) as well as an associate editor with the Nationality Papers.

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