



The Metamorphosis of Democracy: The Buffer Zone Between Fascist Russia and Liberal Democracies

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Abstract

The collapse of communism and with it the end of the Cold War and the reunification of Germany everywhere in the West, had created the illusion of the "End of History". This illusion had no way of feeding the following illusion - about the so-called natural process of social transfer from communism ala Soviet-Russian to liberal democracy. This entire course of modern European history was, it seems, part of a failed Brussels strategy. Meanwhile, new political movements are taking shape in the Belgrade-Vienna-Warsaw axis, and with this, illiberal forces are being established in other countries as well. All of them have expressed some kind of readiness for cooperation with Putin's Russia, thus reviving a buffer zone between modern Russian fascism and the liberal democracies of Brussels. This return of modern fascism in Europe is being strongly exploited by Serbia promoting its national agenda.

Keywords: *Metamorphosis of Democracy; Return of Fascism; Illiberalism; Buffer Zone; Serbia; Kosova*

Introduction

On the eve of the fall of the Berlin Wall [1989] everywhere in Western Europe, but with more emphasis in Central Europe, in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the political credo became the slogan of the automatic transition of the old continent as a whole to the democratic order.

But the European transit center and that of Southeast Europe have a long and strong tradition of "illiberalism".

History has taught us that even the multinational central powers, such as the Austro-Hungarian Empire or that of the younger period, Tito's Yugoslavia, highly pampered by the Perednimi, in a historical moment, quickly collapsed, becoming the cause of the explosion of world wars and genocide practiced with emphasis on small peoples. As great powers, they once had the main say in the division of spheres of interest, whereas today one is as a geographical entity, but not as a political unit of the EU, while the core of the creation of Versailles, as it is rightly called the legacy of the former Yugoslavia - Serbia is swinging in the pendulum between the EU and BRICS.

1. The Role of Illiberals in the Return of Fascism in Europe

The winner of the national elections in Austria is Herbert Kickl, who openly declares himself an "illiberal" nationalist, even more radical than the German AfD. He claims to be the "people's chancellor" - note Hitler's language!

It has been a long time since Brussels and the Perednimi in general have tolerated the illiberal Aleksander Vučić holding power in neighboring Serbia.

Between Herbert Kickl, who does not hide his connection with Putin, and his two neighbors - Viktor Orban in Hungary and Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia, a growing front of ideological opponents of traditional Europe is emerging.

In the meantime, Slovakia has joined this axis of the illiberal trio, and then, in the following year, when the national elections will be held, the Czech Republic is expected to join it as well. This will be the axis of the illiberal radicals who will badly hit European liberal democracy through the creation of a political rift in relation to the behavior of Brussels towards Moscow.

It can already be said that this warned danger is difficult to avoid.

The collapse of Russian-style communism, the end of the Cold War and with this the reunification of Germany throughout the West, had created illusions regarding the liberal order, the future of Europe!

But, if the Soviet Union had managed to experience the disintegration of the USSR without much trauma, as that process passed without a struggle between the former peoples of communist Russia, the neglect it did to the process of the disintegration of Yugoslavia caused the continent's greatest bloodshed after the war World War II, not counting what is currently happening in Ukraine, which will end with two genocidal enterprises that Serbia carried out: the first against the Bosniaks in Bosnia and the second against the Albanians in Kosova.

Peredni's illusion of the so-called natural process of social transfer from communism ala Soviet-Russian to liberal democracy, turned out to be part of a failed strategy of Brussels. The course of events turned out to be quite different.

The lecture that the Russian political leadership issued after the collapse of Yugoslavia and the tolerance it gave to Serbian expansionism, signaled to Putin that he could do the same thing as Milosevic and his followers did in Serbia in relation to the revision of the political map.

The embryo of the revisionist political course that Putin undertook in relation to Ukraine can be said to have started at the Dayton Conference, when Serbia was imposing the creation of a Serbian entity in Bosnia, and then at the Rambouillet Conference, when Serbia was also claiming to laid the foundations of a Serbian entity in Kosova, which would enable the annexation of its north.

Only when Vladimir Putin began a large-scale invasion of Ukraine, even the most optimistic supporters of the policy of rapprochement with Russia, as they had earlier done with Serbia after the war, will have a clear understanding of the course of political developments. But if, unlike Russia, Serbia no longer has the power to impose itself on the world order, it provokes its neighbors and is working to create facts about the realization of its strategic objective related to the notion of "Serbian World". , quite similar to Putin's strategy for the "Russian World", which he is already realizing step by step with the help of the destructive flames of the war in Ukraine.

2. Buffer Zone between Fascist Russia and Liberal Democracies

Taking into consideration the new political movements in the Belgrade-Vienna-Prague axis, the expected establishment of illiberals in other countries of the former Soviet hemisphere in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, then the conclusion would be clear: the creation of a group of states close to Putin, as a buffer zone between modern Russian fascism and the liberal democracies of Brussels.

Meanwhile, this group is creating its own identity and is expressing it loudly in the European Parliament.

The illiberal buffer-zone between liberal Europe and authoritarian Russia is being formed in a broad geopolitical and ideological context, including the countries of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, which are increasingly influenced by illiberal currents coming from within and without. This development is related to the clash of values between the liberal order represented by the European Union and the authoritarian forces promoted by Russia and other supporters of a non-liberal governance model.

2.1 The Extent of Russia's Influence and Anti-liberalism

Russia has successfully pursued a strategy of intervention and support of political forces and ideologies that promote illiberalism and authoritarianism in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. This approach serves several purposes:

Weakening European unity: By supporting populist, nationalist and anti-liberal movements, Russia aims to weaken political cohesion and undermine the role of the European Union as a powerful global actor, especially on its eastern borders.

Maintaining a sphere of influence: Russia wants to maintain influence in the countries of the former Soviet Union and the Balkans, creating a political and ideological "buffer zone" that protects its borders from the influence of liberal Europe and NATO.

2. 2 The Spread of Illiberalism in the Countries of the Balkans and Eastern Europe

In some Eastern European and Southeastern [Balkan] countries, the illiberal governance model has gained ground through authoritarian leaders and political parties pursuing ultra-nationalist, anti-immigration, and anti-Western policies. Some examples:

Hungary and Viktor Orbán: One of the main exponents of illiberalism in Europe is Viktor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary. On April 25, 2010, a new era in Hungarian politics began. Viktor Orbán and his national-populist party, Fidesz, won the parliamentary elections with a two-thirds majority. From then on, nothing stopped him in his march to transform Hungary into an illiberal democracy.[1]

Orbán has embraced a model of governance that includes the centralization of power, the restriction of media freedom, and the marginalization of civil society. He has often described Hungary as an "illiberal democracy", openly challenging the liberal values of the EU.

Serbia and Aleksandar Vučić: Serbia, under the leadership of Aleksandar Vučić, has also embraced an illiberal model of governance, with the influence of state control over the media, the weakening of democratic institutions, and a balanced approach between West and East (especially ties with Russia and China).

Aleksandar Vucic, who first became prime minister in 2014 and then president in 2017, has played a central role in transforming Serbia into an illiberal state.

Vucic has created a system where executive power is concentrated in his hands and where the role of parliaments and other democratic institutions has weakened. This has led to a reduction in the balance and separation of powers.

One of the main features of the illiberal government in Serbia is the strong control over the media. In mainstream media, a pro-government line often prevails, while critical media are marginalized or face political and economic pressure. Independent media often struggle to operate freely and maintain a balanced platform.

Even the judicial system is under the influence of the government. Vucic and his party have undertaken reforms that have weakened the independence of the judiciary, making it easier for the government to control legal processes and exert political influence over court decisions.

The political opposition in Serbia is weakened and often faces repression or marginalization. The case of the opposition politician Nikolla Sandulović [2] is among the most egregious, since he was brought to the brink of death by the torture of Secret Service - BIA officers.

Opposition parties have had difficulty seriously challenging the government in elections due to the manipulation of electoral processes and pro-government media.

Another element of Vucic's illiberal governance is the use of nationalist and victimizing discourse to mobilize popular support. The rhetoric of victimization is used to create a sense of external danger and to justify authoritarian rule as a means of protecting national interests.

While Serbia maintains close relations with the West, especially for economic reasons, Vucic and his government often use a discourse critical of the EU and the US to strengthen the sense of national sovereignty and defend illiberal policies. Serbia has embraced a model of illiberal governance under the leadership of Aleksandar Vucic. This illiberal model challenges the EU's efforts to integrate Serbia and promote democratic values in the region, creating a complex situation where Serbia stands between aspirations for European integration and ties with Russia and China.

2.3 Relations between Illiberalism and Nationalism

In all the countries of the so-called "buffer zone" between the EU and Russia, illiberalism is often accompanied by a rise in nationalism, which is used to mobilize popular support and reinforce the narrative of national sovereignty over international cooperation. This rhetoric has particular resonance in regions where historical feelings of victimization by foreign powers run deep. In this way, through the connection with the historical past, in Hungary, Serbia and other countries, illiberalism uses nostalgia for previous periods of national glory and criticism of Western intervention as a means to justify authoritarian practices and build a strong identity. national, often in opposition to the liberal and democratic ideas of the EU.

3. Relations between the EU and Russia Through the Buffer Zone

While some countries, such as Hungary and Serbia, maintain close relations with Russia, they also benefit from membership or close ties with the EU. This creates a situation where these countries form an ideological and political buffer zone, which is located between the pressures from the EU and the influence of Russia:

Dual position: Serbia, for example, pursues a balanced policy that puts it in a position to benefit from both Russia and the EU. It has close economic and strategic ties with the EU, which has enabled it to

use the EU as a real ATM for more than a decade, while simultaneously strengthening ties with Moscow and Beijing.

Orbán and Putinism: Viktor Orbán has often praised Vladimir Putin's model of authoritarian rule and the use of "managed democracy", while pursuing policies that limit EU influence within his country.

3.1 Weakening of EU and NATO Institutions

In 2013, Croatia would join the EU, after the accession of Slovenia as the former two northern republics of the former Yugoslavia. The integration process of the Western Balkans was then entering a long pause!

Before the integration process of Croatia was well finalized, the then head of the commission publicly announced the "stopping of the march" of the EU! «Erweiterungsmüdigkeit» ["Expansion fatigue"] was the word of the day. This expression has not left the agenda yet. Each side: both Brussels and the candidate states are clear: "new accessions to the EU can only take place after a substantial reform of the Union's structures." [3]

In 2014, German Chancellor Angela Merkel initiated the so-called "Berlin Process". With the idea of cultivating further the hopes for the integration of the region.

Berlin seems to have been more clear than other EU centers that the economic and political stagnation accompanying these relations with the candidate countries had to be overcome. The goal of the Berlin Process was and still is: maintaining the facade!

The EU has long been in the vicious circle of internal crisis. Berlin and Paris have made it clear that, before any possible next enlargement, the EU must undergo an internal reform process. They have openly expressed their intention to abolish the principle of unanimity in the decision-making of the European Council. But this step is very difficult, especially for small countries. Thus they - the small countries, would lose their weight and become vassals of the European powers. They, that is, the small countries, do not want to give up the right of veto.

A decade later the Berlin Process narrowly escaped a public fiasco.

This trend of the integration process seems to have encouraged the illiberals within the EU, and above all those of the Western Balkans, to deepen cooperation among themselves to "consolidate" the so-called "buffer zone" of the illiberals, always flirting and more with Russia and China.

The illiberal buffer zone also negatively affects efforts to integrate the Balkan countries into the EU and NATO, creating a gap between the values promoted by the West and the authoritarian practices of these countries. For the EU and NATO, this area represents a great challenge in several directions:

Obstructing the European integration process: Countries that follow illiberal policies slow down the EU enlargement process and increase tensions within the bloc, as these countries often refuse to implement the democratic standards required by the EU.

Weakening NATO security: As some of these countries are NATO members or candidates for membership, the presence of illiberal governments within this area could undermine the Alliance's unity and effectiveness in dealing with common threats, especially in connection with Russia.

4. Mechanisms of Spread of Illiberalism

The spread of illiberalism in the buffer zone between liberal Europe and authoritarian Russia is also supported by several other factors:

Media support and information influence: Russia and other authoritarian countries use propaganda and media to spread anti-liberal messages and polarize public opinion in Eastern European and Balkan countries. Media supporting illiberalism often emphasize the danger of "Western degeneration" and promote "traditional values" as a counterweight to liberal modernism.

Economic influence: Russia and China, through strategic investments and large infrastructure projects, increase their influence in buffer zone countries, creating economic dependencies that weaken these countries' efforts to fully integrate into the EU.

The illiberal buffer zone between liberal Europe and fascist Russia is being created through a combination of political, economic and cultural factors. While Russia benefits from the spread of illiberalism to maintain its influence in the region, some countries in the Balkans and Eastern Europe follow authoritarian governance models that challenge the EU's liberal democratic order. This area is an open field for the clash of values between West and East, making it difficult for the EU to maintain its cohesion.

Recently, in relation to Russia, Viktor Orbán speaks more and more loudly about his doctrine of "economic neutrality", more or less as his brother Aleksander Vučić does with the so-called "military neutrality".

At the height of the war in Ukraine, after taking the next presidency of the EU, without even a mandate to negotiate on behalf of the EU, Orban travels to Moscow. Before the meeting with Putin, he had posted this statement on his social network: "We cannot sit back and wait for the war to end miraculously. We will be an important instrument to take the first steps towards the conclusion of peace." [4]

According to the Swedish writer Richard Swartz, these flagrant calculations of European illiberals, which are basically anti-European actions, have seriously damaged solidarity with Ukraine. A part of the Germans [AfD, etc.], the Austrians, the Serbs...proclaim neutrality as their bloodline, don't worry, while the Slovaks and Czechs dream of it without openly admitting it. The central Llandes [German SR] continue to preserve the tradition of a special Habsburg position, which has long been an almost unconscious phantom pain, and today already have their own parliamentary group in the European Parliament, which is likely to win even more members.[5]

This action of Orbani had been judged by both the representatives of the EU and those of NATO, describing it as disturbing.

This visit of the illiberal Orban, worry, undermined and undermines the interests of the European Union.

5. The Return of Modern Fascism - the Serbian Nationalist Agenda

Serbia is exploiting the return of modern fascism in Europe, often disguised as illiberalism, to promote its national agenda and strengthen its position in regional and international politics. Illiberal movements in Europe are characterized by nationalist, authoritarian and anti-Western tendencies, which are in line with some aspects of Serbia's policies, especially in relation to the Kosova issue, relations with the European Union and ties with Russia. Through flirting with Russia, Serbia is trying to put pressure on

the EU and enjoy concessions after concessions.[6] In relation to Kosova, during a decade of imposed dialogue, Serbia, that is, has achieved this goal.

These developments have created a favorable ground for Serbia to strengthen its position and maintain an important role in the geopolitical game of the Balkans.

The term illiberal [illiberal] democracy refers to a system of government that has some democratic features, but in which the essence of liberal freedoms are not guaranteed, or trampled on with both feet. The term illiberal democracy has recently been used to describe an authoritarian type of representative democracy, in which politicians are de jure democratically legitimated, but the population is limited in the exercise of fundamental rights; in this sense, Fareed Zakaria probably used the expression for the first time in Foreign Affairs magazine in 1997.

On the other hand, an illiberal democracy is understood at the classical level as a system that meets the institutional requirements of a democracy, including political freedoms, but in which the relevant political majority does not commit to preserving the general freedoms in its decisions.

Classical thinkers such as John Stuart Mill (On Liberty, 1863) emphasized this danger of democracy turning into the tyranny of the majority and therefore warned of a slide towards modern fascism, as M. Albright warned.

According to political scientists such as Wolfgang Merkel, Hans-Jürgen Puhle, Aurel Croissant, Claudia Eicher and Peter Thiery, illiberal democracy is a flawed type of democracy – alongside exclusive democracy, enclave democracy and delegative democracy.[7]

The main ways Serbia is using this context:

Strengthening nationalism and illiberalism in domestic politics: In Serbia, the government of Aleksandar Vučić has embraced elements of illiberal policies, including controlling the media, weakening democratic institutions and supporting a kind of soft authoritarianism. As illiberal ideologies spread across Europe, Serbia has found room to follow a similar line, using nationalism and populism to gain domestic support and strengthen political control.

Relations with Hungary and Turkey: The most plastic examples in this context are Serbia's relations with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan,[8] the second leader known for promoting illiberalism in Europe and beyond. Orbán has forged a close partnership with Vučić, helping to support Serbia's nationalist and anti-Western agenda.

Meanwhile, cooperation between Serbia and Turkey in the context of Serbian illiberalism can be perceived as a stab in the back for the European Union (EU) for several complex reasons, which include geopolitical tensions, challenges to the liberal democratic order and the relations of Serbia and Turkey with the EU.

These relations have significantly contributed to the consolidation of authoritarian power in the Ankara-Belgrade-Budapest line. The three leaders have undermined media freedom, completely control state institutions and marginalized the political opposition. These policies are contrary to the fundamental values of the EU, which promote democracy, the rule of law and human rights.

All three countries support policies that favor national sovereignty over integration and international commitments, an attitude that brings them closer together to the detriment of the EU's rules-based order.

This cooperation with such an illiberal background negatively affects the EU's efforts to promote democracy and stability in the Western Balkans. For the EU, the expansion of the influence of Serbian illiberalism and the ties with a Turkey increasingly far from democratic values, create a double challenge.

5.1 Serbia and Turkey as Independent Geopolitical Actors

In a climate where the EU is trying to increase its influence in the Balkans and promote democratic reforms, the strategic cooperation between Serbia and Turkey serves as a challenge to this influence. Both countries pursue independent foreign policies that are sometimes at odds with EU interests.

Turkey has increased its role in the Western Balkans, benefiting from the sharing of EU interests in the region. Through economic investments, cultural ties and military aid, Turkey has strengthened relations with Serbia and other Balkan countries. This cooperation emphasizes Ankara's role as an independent geopolitical actor that can rewrite the balance of power in the region.

The President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has said [on October 11, 2024] that Turkey and Serbia have decided to work together to develop their defense industries.

During his visit to Belgrade, the Turkish leader also announced that part of their cooperation will be the Turkish drones that will be donated to Serbia.

"Turkey and Serbia must take steps together, but these steps are the joint formation of a defense industry, to guarantee peace", Erdogan said in a joint conference with the Serbian president, Aleksandar Vučić, in Belgrade.[9]

Serbia, balancing its relations with Turkey and Russia, challenges the EU's efforts to strengthen its influence and achieve stability in the Balkans. For the EU, a Serbia that follows illiberal policies and that strengthens ties with countries outside the European bloc is an obstacle to integration and the fulfillment of European standards.

Serbia has used illiberal rhetoric to strengthen its stance against Kosova's independence. Illiberalism is often associated with support for "traditional values", national sovereignty and a rhetoric against external interference, which coincides with Serbia's position in relation to the recognition of Kosova and its integration into international institutions. In this context, Belgrade has no way to hide its real anti-Western position.

Serbia takes advantage of the illiberal anti-Western movements in Europe to challenge the influence of the European Union and the United States, which are the main supporters of Kosova. This context offers Serbia a platform to strengthen ties with countries that are not enthusiastic about EU or NATO expansion, weakening support for Kosova.

5.2 Support of Serbia by Russia and China

Serbia has benefited from its strategic partnership with Russia and China, countries that also promote illiberal and authoritarian policies. Russia and China, through diplomatic, military and economic support, give Serbia a wider platform to challenge the liberal democratic order in the region. Russia supports not only authoritarian states like Serbia, Hungary... but also illiberal and nationalist movements in Europe. Serbia uses this partnership to strengthen its position in regional affairs, including Kosova, but also in order to realize its expansionist platform, which is now known under the motto of the "Serbian World". Meanwhile, Russia uses Serbia as a key point of influence in the Balkans, a region of geopolitical importance for Moscow.

Serbia uses this support from Russia and China along with illiberalism as an ideology and nationalist rhetoric to influence the Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Kosova, aiming to destabilize these countries and the region as a whole. For example, support for Republika Srpska and Milorad Dodik's nationalist and separatist stances are part of a broader Serbian strategy to use illiberal movements to try to destabilize Bosnia. Meanwhile, in the north of Kosova, Serbia supports parallel structures and groups that serve its agenda to undermine the authority of Pristina, using illiberal narratives to maintain influence in this region.

On the one hand, Serbia openly challenges European integration by deepening cooperation with Russia and China, while on the other hand, it uses the growth of illiberalism in Europe to delay or undermine EU integration efforts. While some European countries are embracing more nationalistic policies and distancing themselves from liberal values, Serbia is using this moment to negotiate more favorable positions in its European integration process, defying some of the EU's strict criteria for democratic reforms.

Conclusion

The return of modern fascism and illiberalism in Europe provides Serbia with a favorable context to promote its nationalist agenda and strengthen its position in regional and international politics. Through nationalist rhetoric, partnerships with countries that promote illiberal policies, and challenging western democratic institutions, Serbia uses this climate to continue its strategies in the region, especially in relation to Kosova and Bosnia and Herzegovina, but not excluding penetration into Montenegro. and North Macedonia. Meanwhile, Serbia uses the rhetoric of historical victimization, a common feature in illiberal movements, to build a narrative where it presents itself as a victim of the historical injustices of the West, especially in relation to the breakup of Yugoslavia and the independence of Kosova. This narrative helps Serbia build domestic support for its policies and unite nationalist groups.

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