

## Today in the Balkans, tomorrow in your backyard

As of today, European citizens can watch the troubling developments in Serbia from the comfort of their own homes. Beyond the adverse effects of cooperation with China, which represent only one manifestation of a broader problem, these developments encompass systemic corruption; clientelism, with its corrosive impact on the public interest; the erosion of the social fabric and the deliberate cultivation of divisions; the selective application of the law under strong political influence; the neglect of cultural and identity-based values; and the dismantling of all pillars of society that refuse to submit to the autocratic regime—apparently showing no mercy even toward the Church, universities, healthcare, schools, or key institutions of the state. This process is also fostering growing distrust within society—distrust of the community and of fellow citizens—while simultaneously spreading distrust toward the citizens of neighbouring countries.

The media space in Serbia has, to a large extent, been taken over, directly or indirectly, by the ruling regime. As a result of the degradation and dysfunction of the institutions responsible for oversight, control, and regulation, the Public Broadcasting Service airs little beyond the regime's official narrative. This narrative entails suppressing civic initiatives aimed at articulating and defending the public interest, while branding as traitors and foreign agents—Russian, Western, and even Chinese—anyone who resists arbitrariness, greed, the pursuit of power, and the erosion of the state and society. Private media outlets are largely dependent on advertising revenue. Given the advanced criminalization of many spheres of social life, including the economy, major advertising clients are once again often individuals or companies connected to the regime. As a result, editors of private media outlets are under pressure to practise self-censorship in order to survive in the market.

For citizens, social media have become one of the few remaining sources of information outside the dominant media system. However, the regime does not hesitate to persecute, arrest, and imprison prominent voices on social media. As a consequence, a citizen of Serbia may hear that the students are, in fact, terrorists who want to destroy the state. For 21 months, students have been demanding that those responsible for the deaths of people beneath the canopy of the unsafe railway station be prosecuted in accordance with the law.

The station was still in the status of an unfinished construction site, yet, the people had been summoned by leading Serbian politicians to come there and use the station. In addition, regime-aligned media deny that cars driven by regime hardliners have repeatedly rammed into protesting students at full speed and that students have suffered serious injuries, including fractures of the skull and jaw. The accusations by a female student that a senior police officer in the Government of Serbia building threatened her with rape, as well as reports of students providing crucial assistance to firefighters in extinguishing fires, have received little media attention (except of rare cases such as Insajder and N1).

It would be a serious mistake to assume that the specific situation in Serbia is merely local in nature, of exclusively local significance, or isolated from the rest of the world. The adviser working in the building of the Presidency of Serbia and advising the President of Serbia is German and is paid by Germany. The media and campaign consultants of Serbian

President include prominent Israelis. Other political, media, economic, campaign, and public-relations advisers include Dominique Strauss-Kahn, former Director of the International Monetary Fund; Alfred Gusenbauer, former Chancellor of Austria; Franco Frattini, former Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs; Tony Blair, through his consulting firm, Blair; and Alastair Campbell, Blair's former Director of Communications, who lectured regime representatives and was part of the Blair Serbia team. At present, the influence of Chinese media, communications, and campaign experts remains unknown. However, it is clear that the machinery and components of Serbia's autocratic regime constitute a global enterprise.

Political support for the Serbian autocracy is provided by European, American, Chinese, and Russian politicians alike, all of whom benefit from the ruling regime. The only ones who are suffering are the citizens of Serbia, whose society and state are facing the threat of plunging into an abyss of disappearance.

A concise summary of the processes of democratic degradation that lead to similar outcomes can be described as follows. Growing individualism, the decline of the family values, diminished civic attention to the common interest, and an increasing focus on immediate personal interests reduce people's willingness to see through the underlying dynamics of social and economic developments, while opportunism makes them reluctant to step outside their current comfort zone and take risks for the sake of the common good.

The immediate decisions of individuals increasingly depend on information that does not come from friends, neighbours, and colleagues, but is instead acquired through media content. Under such circumstances, political power is gained by whoever controls the media. At the same time, media organizations are mostly profit-oriented enterprises seeking to survive under conditions of market competition. Media outlets that adhere to established professional principles and refuse to reproduce the narratives of dominant political actors inevitably receive less advertising and encounter greater formal and informal obstacles from the state. They cannot withstand the competition and eventually disappear.

Since the media operate within a commercial environment, one simplified way of describing the situation is to say that political influence tends to accrue to those who possess substantial financial resources. Since money and new economic value are generated primarily by companies, and above all by large corporations, their influence on political developments continues to grow. Our democracy, once considered exemplary, although never without shortcomings, appears increasingly to have been transformed into a system that neither adequately articulates the interests of society nor consistently pursues broader social objectives, but instead responds to an increasing degree to the interests and preferences of large corporations.

It is important to emphasize that the companies themselves cannot necessarily be blamed for this development. Their fundamental purpose is generally defined in terms of maximizing profit while operating within the framework of applicable laws. But do company directors ultimately make all the relevant decisions? I would argue that they do not, because their freedom of action is structurally constrained. If, for ethical reasons—for example, by

halting mining projects that cause substantial environmental damage—they were to make a decision that significantly reduced the company's profits, there is a considerable possibility that they would eventually be replaced by the owners or shareholders whose interests had been adversely affected.

Let us assume, however, that the shareholders themselves are philanthropic and willing to sacrifice part of their profits in order to protect the environment and local communities. The company could then face a competitive disadvantage, because companies operate within competitive markets, and there will almost inevitably be at least some actors willing to accept a greater degree of environmental or social harm in pursuit of higher returns. In this sense, one might conclude that it is not necessarily individual decision-makers, but rather the impersonal logic of capital and the pursuit of profit that ultimately exerts the strongest influence on the decisions being made.

Is this necessarily bad for humanity as a whole? Not necessarily. There may be circumstances in which societies have to accept environmental costs in one part of the world in order to achieve benefits elsewhere, and difficult trade-offs may sometimes be unavoidable. The problem, however, may lie in the fact that major and consequential strategic decisions require long-term planning—sometimes over a century or even more—while the time horizon associated with the pursuit of profit is often considerably shorter, frequently limited to a few years.

If this assessment is not entirely misguided, the situation might be described metaphorically as follows: we are travelling on a bus moving at very high speed through a series of sharp turns, while the driver is short-sighted and is not wearing glasses. The metaphor may be exaggerated, but it captures the potential danger of combining enormous collective power with a limited capacity—or willingness—to consider long-term consequences. The number of strategic decisions and policy choices made by the EU that have subsequently proved to be highly problematic is steadily increasing. For many of the more recent decisions taken by Trump's America, it remains uncertain whether they will achieve the desired effects. However, the effects of earlier decisions have fallen far short of expectations. There is a strong impression that there is an urgent need to change the way decisions are made at the highest level, and to make use as soon as possible of long-term projections, which surely already exist

“I know I'm paranoid, but that does not mean they're not following me.” What concerns me particularly is the possibility that, in terms of their moral and ethical choices, their conception of political objectives, their relationship to the common interest, and their use of political communication and influence, some top ranking EU officials, such as Ursula von der Leyen and António Costa may have reached the state of mind of the President of Serbia some five or six years ago. If they continue along this path, there are reasons to be concerned. Too many European politicians support Serbia's autocratic leadership and seek to preserve its political stability, treating an apparent political victory—achieved through rigged and forcibly imposed elections—as legitimate, despite growing tensions between the government and younger generations in Serbia. With their help, the Serbian autocrat might well manage to win over his own youth, but I find it difficult not to be concerned about what this could mean for Europe in the relatively near future.

At the same time, catastrophic or quasi-paranoid interpretations are unlikely to help us find a solution. What we need instead is a way out. It seems clear that we need to strengthen each individual's inclination toward deeper reflection, maintain a consistently critical attitude toward media content, and develop greater resilience to media manipulation and politicians populism. We should also encourage greater tolerance in our immediate interactions with others. Conversations should not serve merely as opportunities for personal emotional venting. Instead, with genuine goodwill and a willingness to contribute something constructive, we should try to communicate to our interlocutors what we believe they may be overlooking and what is genuinely relevant to the issue under discussion. We should be prepared to listen to opposing views, consider the arguments presented, and even change our own position when there are good reasons to do so. Above all, however, we need to help people see beyond immediate circumstances, consider the more distant future, and understand that one of the most effective ways of pursuing legitimate personal interests is through the long-term success and stability of the community as a whole.

It is also important to understand that collective goals can be worth pursuing and that defending them may sometimes require accepting reasonable risks and stepping beyond one's immediate comfort zone. There was a time when many of these ideas were communicated to us by our elders and through religious institutions. Religion functioned, among other things, as a form of social cohesion, a kind of "glue," despite its many shortcomings and contradictions. Many of us have gradually lost that source of cohesion. At the same time, some of our fellow citizens—the new citizens of Europe who have arrived over the past several decades—may still retain their own "glue": either religious or other forms of social and communal solidarity that many established European societies have weakened or lost. I hope that it is possible to find some form of "glue" of our own: a shared set of values and principles capable of connecting individual interests with the long-term interests of society. Perhaps a careful reader will examine the arguments presented above and convince me, through sound counterarguments, that they are unfounded and that there is, in fact, little reason for concern. If that were to happen, I would be genuinely happy.