

Balkan strongmen: exit from history

By Bernd Fischer,
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It has been fifteen months since the death in The Hague of Slobodan Milosevic, the last of the 20th-century Balkan strongmen. The former leader of Serbia had been sent from Belgrade to face trial for war crimes on 28 June 2001, twelve years to the day after his speech at Gazimestan in Kosovo (on the 600th anniversary of the myth-encrusted battle of 1389) which formed the prelude [0] to the decade of wars and the disintegration of Yugoslavia that followed.

If 28 June, St Vitus's day, thus constitutes a key symbolic date in the history of Serbia and the Balkans, the demise of Milosevic [0] in March 2006 - with his trial unfinished and amid a swirl of rumour - has its own symbolic significance for the region. For it gave new life to a long-standing debate concerning the nature of political leadership in the Balkans, which in recent centuries has experienced more than its share of strongmen [1] - from kings to generals to nationalist demagogues and communist-era tyrants. Pessimistic observers have suggested that we have not seen the last of the likes of Slobodan Milosevic, Nicolae Ceausescu, Enver Hoxha and Todor Zhivkov; that their political style is so thoroughly engrained in the Balkan psyche that it is only a matter of time before their successors reappear to drag the region back into political darkness.

Any discussion of this issue must be seen in the context of history, which in this case may help determine the causes of the phenomenon of Balkan strongmen, why the era lasted so long, and whether authoritarianism really is a cultural inevitability in the Balkans. This long-standing tradition began in the early 19th century as the Ottoman empire, which had ruled much of the Balkans [4] for half a millennium, began collapsing under the weight of modern nationalism. The "great powers" of Europe, which facilitated this collapse, chose new rulers and political systems for the Balkans based on their own policy priorities, and drew up authoritarian constitutions which often mirrored their own.

Bernd Fischer is the author of *Albania at War, 1939-45* (C Hurst [2], 1999) and *Balkan Strongmen: Dictators and Authoritarian rulers of Southeast Europe* (C Hurst [3], 2007)

The newly created Balkan states were therefore saddled with the likes of Otho (Otto), the first king of Greece [5], a 17-year-old Bavarian prince whose advisors considered the natives to be too primitive and unfit to participate in their own government. The transplanted German aristocrats like Otho struggled with the Ottoman heritage of polyglot societies and Balkan particularism, but did manage to further the process of nation-building - albeit with a focus on an issue that could easily turn toxic: irredentism.

This Balkan nationalism was largely driven by fear - fear that the "other" will end up in occupation of territory once held by "our" medieval hero. But nationalism was always augmented by another fear, the fear of internal security services. By exploiting the two, most 19th-Balkan strongmen survived and thrived, at least until the former fear resulted in international tension which contributed [6] to the outbreak of the great war in 1914.

History, not innateness

The post-1918 period brought on the next generation of these strongmen. The period began in the midst of great hope with the old illiberal ruling class replaced by extended suffrage and elements of populist democracy. New parties developed clear programmes that generally included the establishment of full constitutional democracy.

Most of these early hopes were quickly dashed as old and new political, social, and economic problems proved to be more enduring than the promise. Among other factors, a structural peasant problem (where too many people were working in conditions of primitive, under-resourced agriculture) was exacerbated by the great depression of 1929-31 to allow ambitious leaders with a new political narrative to emerge. They presented themselves as "saviours" of the people, the nation and the state, and - often with the support of the military and helped by their exploitation of popular fears of the "other" - they were able to push the Balkans from proto-democracy to authoritarianism to some form of dictatorship.

A prime representative of this generation was King Carol II of Romania who frivolously spent much of his energy [7] on his mistress, his hunting, and his cars, in consequence squandering both his initial popularity and the many benefits with which Romania was bestowed following the 1914-18 war. When Carol was forced to cede territory to the Soviet Union and Hungary at the beginning of the second world war, the nationalism he had inspired and sought to manipulate was turned against him, and forced him into an undignified exit reminiscent of a wild-west movie.

The problem for Carol and his contemporaries was not the region's innate authoritarianism. But a combination of factors - outside influences, dramatic events, intractable internal problems influenced by a stubborn Ottoman heritage, and the example of their predecessors - was reinforced by the arrogance of power to make Balkan politicians assume that only they had the answers.

Politics, not nature

The second world war swept away this second generation of strongmen, their political systems, and their societies, and ushered in the third generation (occasionally in the baggage-train of Soviet troops). All functioned with constitutions, national assemblies, and elections, though none were in any way limited by them.

The post-1945 leaders were faced with the same problems that their pre-war counterparts had been unable to solve - national issues, economic backwardness, and political instability among them. The policy-mix too was often similar, but only after the proper (progressive, socialist) ideological justification could be cobbled together.

One of the better known of these usually dull-grey little tyrants was Nicolae Ceausescu [8] of Romania, the self-styled "great genius of the Carpathians." Ceausescu's remarkable career - remembered for its brutal extremism and his gaudy palaces with all the tacky trappings of an instant billionaire - in many ways both fell within and exceeded the tradition of Balkan strongmen. On Christmas day in 1989 the world awoke to bizarre TV images of his kangaroo trial and instant execution, an event that perhaps more than any other symbolises the end of the era.

As with the earlier generations of strongmen in the Balkans, the regimes that Ceausescu and his contemporaries created were facilitated by a combination of cataclysmic upheaval, external forces, domestic conditions and the ambitions of a few would-be saviours of the nation. Again

they tended to rule through fear of [security services](#) [9] and the fear of the "other" inspired by extreme nationalism which, at least in some cases, created an artificial state of siege. This process developed into a recyclable pattern, but it was still rooted in explicable political circumstances and not inevitable or natural.

A new page?

So in the post-communist period, has there been or will there be a fourth generation of strongmen? The collapse of communism certainly caused considerable dislocation and foreign influences are still very much at play. But the upheaval was perhaps not as great as the collapse of the Ottoman empire, or either of the two 20th-century world wars. And the foreign influence has shifted back to a now generally-democratic west and the impetus seems to be towards a market economy and at least the trappings of democracy.

Still, there has been some support for a fourth version, a "strongman-lite" version, where the leader was expected to use his powers to rapidly transition the state. Representative of the "strongmen-lite" type was [Sali Berisha](#) [10] of Albania, who (before his resurrection as prime minister in 2005, a post he still holds) served as president in 1992-97. In this period, Berisha - encouraged by the Albanian diaspora - attempted to rule through fear, again inspired by force and nationalism, artificial elections, and an authoritarian constitution. But his radical political experiment collapsed in chaos in 1997 amidst a "pyramid scheme" scandal that promised instant wealth to Albanians but instead impoverished thousands who sank their savings into a financial house of cards; this, allied to popular rejection of Berisha's new nationalism and proposed constitution, led to the near-disintegration of the Albanian state.

Was this the last gasp of the concept of strongmen in the Balkans? Certainly their resurrection is inhibited by a number of factors, including the rather undignified end of Ceausescu and [Milosevic](#) [11]. Positive inhibitors include what NGOs often refer to as "democracy factors", which include the press, civil society, the electoral process, and the courts, all strengthened by the prospect of Euro-Atlantic integration. Even in Albania - the poorest country in the region, and the one where dictatorship's legacy was heaviest - there has been progress.

But much remains to be done, and the progress that has been achieved doesn't guarantee that the door to the emergence of the "Balkan strongman" is necessarily closed forever. Some commentators have pointed to the growing nostalgia for the stern, powerful figureheads of old - even if most who can be found at birthday celebrations for dead dictators tend to be retirees who have fallen through the cracks, or individuals who were delegitimised by the collapse of the previous regimes.

But several factors could have the effect of enlarging this alienated group by stirring the Balkan nationalism on which charismatic strongmen thrive. They include failure to resolve the [Kosovo](#) [11] issue, the long-term stalling of the European integration process, or the deepening of the region's economic problems. As my old Balkan history professor always said, an empty belly burns a hole in the flag. The return of Balkan strongmen, then, is not inconceivable - but it is unlikely and certainly not a cultural imperative.

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