

THE PENDULUM

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS MAGAZINE

INTRODUCTION TO THE
PERPLEXING POLITICS OF
SERBIA
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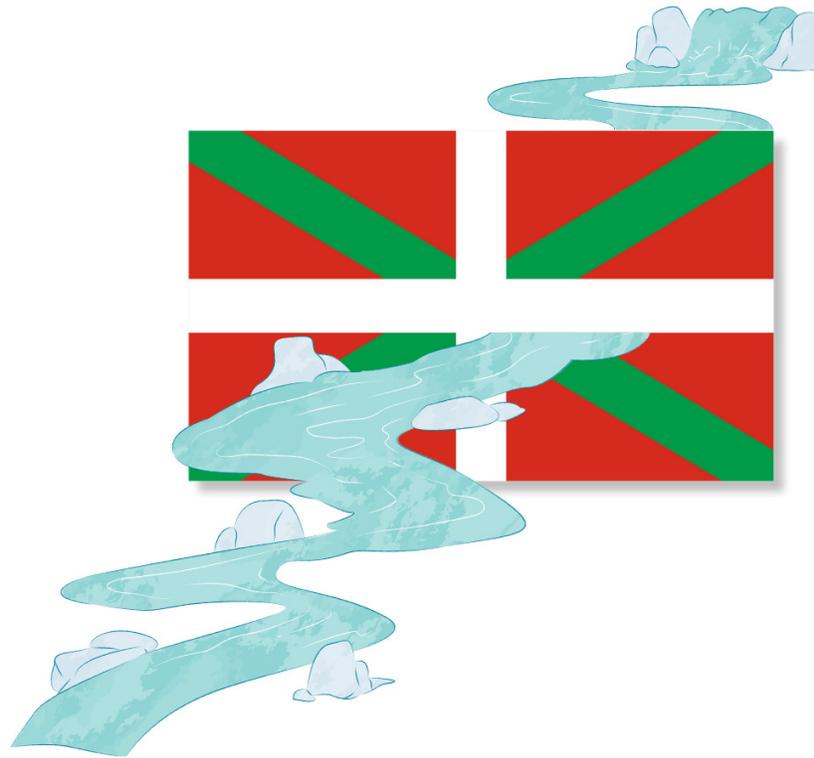
BILBAO'S NEW
MANHATTAN
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Bilbao's New Manhattan

BY KAT SAHD

Just like the ancient River Nervión that weaves through its heart, Bilbao stands as a constant reminder of both the rich past and vibrant future of the Basque people. The biggest city in the Basque Country in Spain, Bilbao is a seat of culture and tradition that the people are fighting to preserve as they continue to invest in growth projects. Their ambitious approach to reviving their home has paved the way for future projects, such as plans to energize and grow a small peninsula in the city. This vision is in its early stages of execution and will allow the Basques to keep attracting tourists while serving the needs of the community.

The city has been pouring billions of Euros into enhancing its infrastructure and attracting tourists, keeping their history in mind as they choose what to preserve and what to heighten. For thousands of years, the Basque people have preserved a unique language and tradition separate from Spain, and they have fought for independence for almost as long. Currently, they have the unique position of having fiscal autonomy, meaning that their tax dollars are returned to the Basque government and not Spain. Their agreement includes having to return 800 million euros to Madrid each year, which is only a fraction of the estimated 13 billion annual euros collected from the region. Though this means that they have the independence to invest in their own projects, this also means that any failure is on them alone.

In the 1990's, following years of decline in the shipbuilding, iron, and steel industries that had fueled Bilbao for centuries, as well as high levels of pollution in the environment, the city decided to invest in different tourism projects. These included building the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum, a unique ship-like structure

designed by Frank Gehry, along with other tourist attractions centered around architecture. The combination of intriguing design and construction mixed with places of history and tradition has brought many people to Bilbao, with numbers before COVID averaging at over one million per year. The success was unprecedented, with the term “Bilbao effect” coined to describe the connection between new architecture and the economic prosperity of the city. Many other cities have tried to replicate this feat of tourism, but Gehry, along with others, is skeptical, attributing Bilbao’s success to the Basque commitment to the project as a whole and other outside efforts in the city.

Today Bilbao is starting another ambitious project in the Zorrotzaurre region of the city, an area riddled with abandoned infrastructure and remnants of past industry. The zone’s resurgence, now referred to as the Manhattan of Bilbao, is part of a large plan by the late British-Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid, one of the most creative and accomplished architects of her time. The 838,781 square meter island on the banks of the Nervión estuary will emulate what Bilbao does best. They will preserve historic buildings while incorporating daring design features, starting with large tiles placed on the ground to keep flooding out and create space for parking underground. Press releases proclaim that “the former port and industrial area will become home to nearly 15,000 new residents and will provide workshops, labs, studios and offices for nearly 6,000 working people” once it is completed. The tram system already in place will be extended to run through the area, and there will be more of Bilbao’s signature bridges connecting the formerly isolated island to the rest of Bilbao.

The plans also include the addition of businesses in a project called BETA 2, an industrial building that will be renovated and redesigned. This is where innovative companies will meet to learn from each other and form an economic hub on the peninsula. This project was created through the European movement of AS Fabrik, which aims to train workers in specialized fields that align with the digital transformation and Industry 4.0. This fourth industrial revolution involves bringing manufacturing to connect with growing developments in technology and robotics. BETA 2 will serve as the housing of this AS Fabrik movement through funding by the European Regional Development Fund and the city itself. The building will include working spaces, classrooms, and communal meeting rooms. Local universities such as the University of Mondragon are working alongside companies that will be moving to Zorrotzaurre in order to keep Bilbao’s residents meeting the demands of the modern economy.

The city has already begun the process of finding developers and knocking down buildings that will not be in use, but the end of this project is far from near. They hope to continue to stay relevant and innovative by combining the latest technology with their strengths and serve as a model for cities across the world. Only time will tell if this new design attracts more people to visit and live in Bilbao and if the “Bilbao effect” can be recreated once more.



THE MAHSA AMINI PROTESTS AND THE NEED FOR SANCTIONS RELIEF

BY JOHN ELLIOTT

The Mahsa Amini protests began in response to a young woman's death in the custody of the Iranian morality police but grew to encompass wider social and economic issues in Iran. Many of these issues were caused or exacerbated by U.S. sanctions and signify that the U.S. needs to lift its sanctions against the country, not add more. Sanctions cripple the Iranian economy, which caused the Iranian regime to adhere more strictly to Islamic law, oppress its people further, and take a more adversarial stance towards the United States.

On September 13, 2022, Mahsa Amini was arrested by the Iranian morality police for allegedly wearing her hijab too loosely, thereby violating a rule that requires Iranian women to dress modestly. Witnesses say that she was beaten during her arrest, and she died while in Iranian custody. The Iranian government maintains that she died of a heart attack, but Amini's family disputes this claim. The United Nations issued a condemnation of her death, describing her as a victim of Iran's violence towards women and denial of basic human dignity. Protests broke out in Amini's home province of Kurdistan before her funeral, and authorities fired tear gas at the protesters. These protests spread across Iran, and on September 22, the regime labeled the protests as acts of chaos, saying that while it is acceptable to speak your mind, these displays of burning hijabs and anti-government slogans were not acceptable. On September 30, Police opened fire on protestors outside a police station, and while officials claimed 19 people were killed, Amnesty International alleges that over 66 protestors were killed by security forces. The supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, did not formally address the protests until October 3, at which point he blamed them on a Zionist conspiracy engineered by the U.S. and Israel. While there is a precedent for the U.S. backing protests in Iran that have overthrown regimes, namely that of Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953, there is no factual basis for the claims of international conspiracy, and much of it is likely rooted in antisemitism. After months of sustained protest across the country, on December 4, Iran reportedly abolished the morality police, according to Iran's Attorney General Mohammad Jafar Montazeri, yet there are still numerous other agencies that can enforce the law that led to the arrest of Mahsa Amini. The Iranian ministry of Justice has also not confirmed this report. If this report was confirmed, it would appear to be a concession to the protest movement in an attempt to ease tensions. To date over 19,600 people have been arrested, many of whom are charged with espionage, attacks on government buildings, or links to foreign intelligence services.

The protests have begun to encompass much broader issues than the death of Mahsa Amini, increasingly focusing on Iran's troubled economy. Iran has struggled economically for most of its modern history as a result of the brutal invasion by Iraq under Saddam Hussein, western sanctions, and corruption. Sanctions have generated the heaviest impacts on the Iranian economy, as

illustrated by the Iranian economy's twelve percent GDP growth in 2015, its first full year under the Iran nuclear deal, under which sanctions were removed. However, sanctions were reinstated after the Trump administration unilaterally pulled out of the deal in early 2018. One of the major goals of western sanctions is for Iran to be unable to profit from its oil sales to many countries in the world. Iran's economy is relatively diversified compared to other major oil exporters, but its government still relies heavily on oil revenues. Aside from pushing Iran towards partnering with the Chinese to sell its oil, this limits Iran's ability to profit from its greatest resource. The Trump administration's reimposition of sanctions has also caused high inflation to return to the country. When sanctions were lifted, the inflation rate dropped below ten percent, but inflation is now back over thirty percent. Since the return of sanctions, the currency has dropped in value and on December 29, 2022, Iran fired the president of its central bank after only fifteen months in office. The currency has fallen even more during the protests, from 315,000, to 430,000 rial on the dollar. When the nuclear deal was signed in 2015, the currency traded at 32,000 rial to the dollar. Clearly, the Rial was much stronger after the sanctions were lifted and its collapse after the new sanctions has been precipitous.

Sanctions do not only impact the state of the Iranian economy, but also its internal politics. Protests over the death of a single woman may not have become widespread across Iran in the absence of the harsh economic conditions suffered by the Iranian people. Mahsa Amini's death was just the match that lit the fuse. For example, Nader, a 41 year old construction worker, told the New York Times "I can't keep up with the rising prices, no matter how hard I run." Another protester, Amir, said that "for most of us, normal milestones in life seem like out-of-reach dreams," and "maybe the only way out is to leave Iran." In regards to the prospect of buying a house or a car. These two phenomena may be more closely linked than they appear, as sanctions and the resulting economic turmoil directly led to the harsh morality police that caused Amini's death. Iran's last president, Hasan Rouhani, was a relatively moderate leader who eased enforcement of the morality laws and supported cooperation with western powers. When the Obama administration threatened heavy sanctions in fear of Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon, Rouhani worked with Obama and allowed extensive access to Iran's nuclear facilities to ensure they were not enriching Uranium. In exchange, the U.S. eased sanctions. This could have been the start of increased diplomacy and cooperation between the countries. However, Rouhani and other Iranian moderates soon regretted trusting the United States, as crippling sanctions returned in 2017, when the Trump administration unilaterally pulled out of the agreement despite Iran's continued cooperation. The Trump administration cited concerns over the degree of access to Iranian military facilities, despite the fact that none of the U.S.'s European partners saw this as reason to violate the agreement. The Biden administration continued this hardline stance, expecting Iran to make more concessions than in the original agreement signed by the Obama administration, even though the United States violated the agreement, not Iran. This led to the election of Ebrahim Raisi in 2021, who established a much more hardline administration in Iran that not only is opposed to working with the West but is more determined to enforce

Islamic custom in the country.

After the election of Ebrahim Raisi, Iran has now reportedly enriched its uranium levels to 84 percent purity, the highest ever reported and just six percent from what is necessary to build a nuclear weapon. While Iran is still far from actually constructing a nuclear bomb, the fact remains that this will escalate tensions between Iran and the U.S. This is occurring in the context of Iran's intensifying conflict with Israel for dominion over the Middle East. Israel recently destroyed an Iranian weapons facility in a drone strike. If Iran becomes nuclear, this would mean that both Israel and Iran would be nuclear capable and under control of hardline nationalist leaders. Active proxy conflict, as well as direct strikes, could become more likely and deadly. In this context, the United States needs to lift sanctions and reenter the 2015 nuclear agreement, with a commitment not to violate it in the future. Their sanctions have led to the election of a government which strictly enforces Islamic law, which helped cause the death of Mahsa Amini. It has unleashed tremendous suffering on the Iranian people, as demonstrated by the fact that the protests continue despite Amini's death occurring in early September of 2022. Protests continue to criticize the regime and hijab policy but also demand that Iranians are able to meet basic needs and provide for their families. The world is less safe because the nationalists that the U.S. actions have empowered are now moving closer to building a nuclear weapon as tensions with Israel continue to rise. This can be solved by empowering moderates in Iran through showing that diplomacy can lead to positive results for Iran and the United States, whilst alleviating the suffering of the Iranian people.



EYE FOR AN EYE: THE FIGHT FOR KURDISH INDEPENDENCE

BY TIFFANY PLUSNICK

Karma is the belief that what goes around comes around. In the case of the Turks in their fight against the Kurds, this seems to hold true. The Turks have a long history of discriminating against the Kurds, but this past January a Pro-Iranian group, who support the Kurds, attacked Turkey's military bases in Northern Iraq. This represents a potential reversal in the conflict between the two groups, with serious implications for the control of Kurdish territory in Iraq.

The Kurds are an Iranian ethno-linguistic group that reside in areas of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. This region was part of the Ottoman Empire from 1300 A.D. until World War I, when the empire was defeated and its territory was divided by Allied nations in the Treaty of Sevres, which established the modern Republic of Turkey, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. The treaty promised the Kurds their own country, but this offer was later restricted under the Treaty of Lausanne, making The Kurds the largest ethnic group without a state, as they are divided among northern Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. The vengeance from Pro-Iranian groups is rooted in Turkey's decade-long oppression against the Kurdistan people. Turkey's ruthlessness has lasted over a decade, but the tables may be beginning to turn.

Since the creation of the modern state of Iraq, the history of the Kurdish territory within Iraq's borders has been one of underdevelopment, political and cultural repression, destruction, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. The Iraqi military consistently carried out offensive operations against the Kurds, the largest of which was the Al-Anfal Campaign of 1988, in response to Kurdish attempts to gain autonomy from the Iraqi government. The Al-Anfal campaign also came to be called "The Spoils," highlighting Iraq's aggressiveness and determination to destroy the Kurds, who Saddam Hussein believed were helping Iran in its war against Iraq. The Al-Anfal campaign destroyed tens of thousands of villages and killed tens of thousands of Kurds. This experience led the Kurds to push for their

own autonomous state in order to protect their communities.

Iraq's Kurds want to share establishment in a unified Iraq under a federal system. The Kurds want the entire community to have guaranteed civil rights and democracy. Federalism refers to a system of government where the power is divided between a central authority and constituent political units. This will create a fair degree of local power, including the ability to raise taxes and a militia. The Kurds advocate for two federalist units, one for Iraqi Arabs and one, called Kurdistan, for themselves. However, Turkey has continually opposed the creation of an independent Kurdish state in Iraq. Turkey is concerned with the prospect of Iraqi cities Mosul and the oil-rich Kirkuk potentially being ceded to Kurdistan, as they want to protect their economic and political interests in Northern Iraq. Turkey has military bases in Mosul and relies heavily on oil from Kirkuk. In 1983, Turkey began military operations against bases in Northern Iraq belonging to the Kurdistan Worker's party (PKK), a pro-Kurdish military group which Turkey, along with the US and EU, designates as a terrorist organization for causing social disturbance in Turkey. The former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein let the Turkish forces advance into the Northern part of the country to fight the PKK. By the middle of the 1990s, this "border belt" of Iraq, also known as the "Temporary Danger Zone," had expanded to ten miles. In 1991, Saddam withdrew his forces from this area to focus on the Persian Gulf War. In response, Turkey sent more army units and made a permanent and helicopter base in Bamerni, a Kurdish village in Northern Iraq, extending its reach against the PKK.

Turkey's military operations in Northern Iraq have only increased with time. In 2022, Turkey carried out an average of 7 airstrikes per month in Kurdish areas of Iraq. In response, in 2023 a Pro-Iranian group associated with Iraq's paramilitary, launched a series of rockets targeting the Turkish military base in Northern Iraq. According to the Pentagon, these attacks were carried out "in cooperation with the PPK." This attack on Turkish military bases began to level the playing field in this conflict, retaliating after years of Turkish attacks on the Kurds, which has destabilized the region, causing residents of at least 800 villages to flee their homes. Turkish military presence in the region has turned into a contentious point between Ankara, Turkey's capital, and Baghdad, Iraq's capital. Iraq has repeatedly called on the Turkish government to withdraw from the base. Now, the attack on Turkey's military bases shows pro-Iraqi groups retaliating against Turkish occupation. For years and years, Iraq endured the pain from Turkish groups, but the tides may be turning.

Where do we go from here? Since the Turkish have multiple military bases in Northern Iraq, they are primed for retaliation. They have been attacking the PKK for years, so it is obvious that they are open for revenge. The Iraqi Government still wants the Turkish military bases gone; they frequently condemn that foreign military bases within their borders are illegal. The Kurds continue to hold onto hope for a Federal system, where they want guaranteed rights of their community. However, Turkey dreads the debate of Kurdistan having their own state because they have their own interests in the region that may be threatened if it were in control of the Kurds. The tensions between these competing interests in the region remain, and the Kurds anxiously await Turkey's next move.



INDIVIDUALIST EUROPE: SURGES OF NATIONALISM THREATEN EU

BY OWEN EASTMAN

One of the most interesting dynamics in international relations is the difference between individualism and collectivism, and how their relative prevalence changes over time. Most of mainland Europe is far more collectivist than the rest of the Western world; Hofstede Insights, a think tank with a focus on cultural issues, publishes several metrics on the collectivist-individualist spectrum each year, one of which is a general score from 0 to 100. The higher the number, the more individualist: for instance, most countries in the EU hover between 50 and 70 each year, whereas the United States most recently topped the individualist rankings with a 91. While Europe still lies on the relatively individualist side of the scale in the absolute sense, the continent is typically compared as collectivist in relation to individualistic America, and often swing collectivist in comparison to other major world powers. But such trends did not always exist: in order to understand how Europe gained this collectivist ideology, the entirety of the continent's past must be explored.

Broadly speaking, individualism places great priority on the agency of each human, with further emphasis on independence and self-reliance. This lies in stark contrast to collectivism, which instead prioritizes relationships between

communities over an established hierarchical social structure. Furthermore, individualism exists on both a “micro” and “macro” scale: on first glance, one might believe that nationalism and individualism are vastly different concepts, as one emphasizes the worth of man and the other focuses more on nation-on-nation interactions. Both of these mindsets often coexist in the same societies, however: the general consensus between political theorists is that nationalism and individualism are connected in much the same ways internationalism and collectivism are.

Europe was far more individualistic in the 19th century than it is presently: most economic and philosophic thought of the time emphasized the free-choice basis of liberalism. The principles which made America arguably the most individualist country in the world, in fact, stemmed from the results of the earlier European Enlightenment and influenced similar democratic development in Europe. Late-century philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Stirner emphasized egoist principles of the self and ambitious, drastic action, skewing the attitudes of the continent even more individualist. Nietzsche rejected the belief of Christian moralism as simply another way to subjugate a group of people, choosing instead to uphold the work of individual great men rather than mass social movements. Stirner, similarly, was one of the preeminent founders of the egoist movement, and believed that people always acted in their self-interests no matter their professed morals. To Stirner, one could acknowledge this and live freely, or one could live in denial of this fact and see the world less clearly.

This rise in the perceived importance of the self fed into the practice of nationalism, catalyzing both world wars. After the second World War, Europe had to grapple with the shock of mass destruction, the Holocaust, and the rebuilding of Europe. However, this was instrumental in bringing Europe together as a collectivist society rather than a conglomerate of individual, sequestered nations. Central to efforts to rebuild Europe was the Marshall Plan: spearheaded by the United States, it brought an influx to foreign capital to Europe through investment in agriculture, infrastructure, and purchase of US-made goods. Beyond this continent-based community was an international one as well: the World Bank, The Bretton Woods system, and the United Nations were all created in the decade after the end of the War, further tying the prosperity of Europe to institutions which did not inherently serve the needs of a single group.

One final variable which caused Europe to shift towards collectivism after World War II may have been the memory of that event. Many of the continent’s citizens had seen firsthand how nationalistic fervor had torn apart Europe, and emphasized the solidarity of Europe rather than scapegoating a particular outgroup. The very concept of the dictatorial “cult of personality” which Hitler and Mussolini enjoyed was perhaps the epitome of individualism. The Allies also did not want to repeat the mistake of punishing Germany harshly in the way that the Treaty of Versailles did—this made Germany and Italy more conducive to joining the international institutions that sprung up shortly thereafter.

Politically, contemporary Europe is characterized by a series of collectivist institutions which transcend the national level and create a continent-based identity—the EU, for instance, facilitates the free movement of labor and ideas, creating a cultural melting pot further diversified by the influx of foreign

immigrants. Policies such as state-socialized healthcare and a joint currency further mean that the fates of each country are interconnected with each other. This, however, has led to a growing trend in which national-level politicians feel dissatisfied with the EU's monolithic control on every facet of policy. In times of strife or recession, being able to take control of one's destiny is especially appealing. The financial crash of 2008 exposed the weaknesses of several major players in Europe (Greece, Spain), and other countries did not like the fact that their own economic progress was hampered in the collective sense.

Anti-immigration sentiment has further soured views on the EU and raised concerns about the collective burdens placed on each country. Europe has always been one of the most notable continents in the developing world for its uptake of immigrants, particularly in the latter half of the 20th century. Such uptake was done for utilitarian purposes, however: for instance, the Gastarbeiter system of Germany was created out of a North Europe labor shortage and the high unemployment of Turkey. This free movement of labor created a mutually beneficial situation for both countries, but issues once again arise when countries are instructed to take up immigration quotas that individualist parties perceive to be harmful on the national scale.

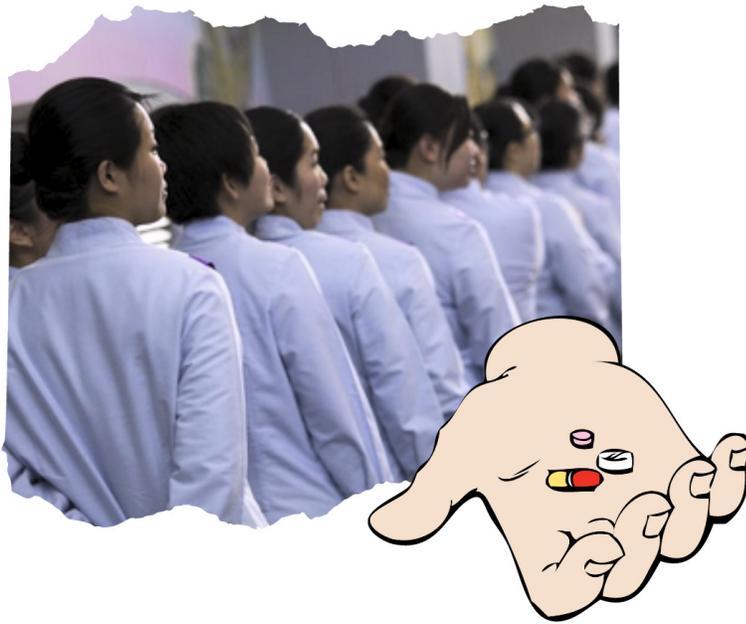
All of this has combined to create a European atmosphere in danger of swinging back towards isolationist authoritarianism, with several countries already under the leadership of politicians who espouse such ideas. Such trends are not particularly new (any major misstep by the EU could cause a withdrawal of support to some degree), but individualist movements seem to crop up whenever a country's prosperity is hampered by globalist sentiment. One could argue that this latest wave of anti-EU, populist sentiment began with the result of the Brexit vote in 2016, with Poland and Italy recently electing nationalist majority coalitions to their parliaments. Newly formed parties espousing these principles have rose meteorically over the past decade: for instance, the *Alternativ für Deutschland* (or *AfD*) party was founded only a decade ago, and capitalized on anti-immigration and Euroskeptic beliefs to receive over 10% of the vote in 2021 to become a major player in the German parliament.

One of the best examples of this recent shift from collectivism to individualism, however, has been the Hungarian *Fidesz* party under prime minister Viktor Orbán, which presently controls 135 of 199 seats in the Hungarian Parliament. Originally formed in 1988 as a coalition of people 35 and younger to oppose the communists, the earliest incarnations of the *Fidesz* did not directly promote drastic measures of individualism. Though they originally sought to break away from the heavily collectivist Soviets, the Hungarians promoted values of greater European integration in its stead. *Fidesz* leadership under Orbán, however, was ousted in 2002 and replaced with the Socialist party. The issues sparking individualism hit Hungary especially hard—the nation's financial services were destabilized following the sharp recession of 2008. The *Fidesz* returned with a new party platform centering around the strengthening of Christian ideals and

economic independence, and Orbán returned to power in 2010 with an absolute majority of Fidesz seats.

Once in office, Orbán most strongly pushed back against EU collectivism on the issue of immigration, constructing a barbed-wire fence on the borders of Hungary and Serbia in order to prevent refugees from entering the country. He famously stated that Hungary “will never, never, ever accept the mandatory quota for migrants” shortly before a referendum where 98 percent of voters also chose to reject this EU legislation. Such rhetoric energized his base further, and Orbán most recently won his fourth term in office in 2022 by a large margin despite facing spirited opposition by the newly formed United For Hungary coalition. Due to nearly a decade of uninterrupted Fidesz rule and the economic success that has followed it, Hungary is now considered to be one of the most individualist European countries, third only to the Netherlands and the United Kingdom in its Hofstede score.

In looking towards the future, it is possible to forecast several different short-term outcomes for Europe. Though recent events may seem irreversible from our relative point of view, the same mechanisms which drive shifts to individualism might also influence a return to collectivism someday. One major factor for this is future changes in prosperity on a national level. Some political theorists believe that humans are driven by economic factors and profit motives more than they are by held ideological beliefs, and thus the continent will see a shift back towards collectivism when it is most financially convenient to do so. Regardless of what may happen later down the line, it is still important to have an understanding of this present individualist-collectivist divide, as it may provide a window into current events.



DRUG TRAFFICKING, THE DEATH SENTENCE, AND WOMEN IN ASIA

BY AVA BARROS

In the past decade, Asia has seen a 50% increase in women in prison. Hong Kong currently has more women in its prisons than anywhere else in the world. According to the World Prison Brief, women and girls comprise 6.9% of the global prison population, compared to 7.2% in Asia and approximately 20% in Hong Kong. The most common crimes committed by women in Asia are non-violent or drug-related. The United Nations (UN) has raised concern and awareness for the “over-incarceration” of women drug traffickers, finding connections between gender, crime, and justice. The executive director of the Cornell Center on the Death Penalty Worldwide, Delphine Lourtou, says, “For too long, gender has been a blind spot in our understanding of criminal justice.”

The area that encompasses Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos, referred to as the Golden Triangle, is one of the busiest global drug trafficking centers. The Golden Triangle is notorious for the farming of opium, which is then used to produce heroin. Heroin became a significant component of the opium trade after World War II. The demand for heroin from United States troops during the Vietnam War led the opium economy of the Golden Triangle to become incredibly profitable. Currently, the most popular drugs in Southeast Asia are methamphetamine, ecstasy, and cocaine. Over the last decade, law enforcement has significantly increased seizures of synthetic drugs such as methamphetamine and crystal methamphetamine. The UN estimates the Asia-Pacific drug trade to be worth over \$60 billion annually, with more than 90% of pills seized coming from Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos.

Despite the worldwide economic decline due to the COVID-19 pandemic, drug trafficking in East and Southeast Asia have expanded. Asian anti-drug authorities confiscated a record high of almost 170 tons of meth in 2020, a 19%

increase from 2019 and more than double the amount seized in 2017. A UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) regional representative stated, “while the pandemic has caused the global economy to slow down, criminal syndicates that dominate the region have quickly adapted and capitalized.” Over the course of the pandemic, drug syndicates in Hong Kong improved their logistical expertise, allowing them to source cocaine from various points in Latin America. In 2022, Hong Kong authorities apprehended large quantities of cocaine coming from Brazil, Costa Rica, and Guatemala, among other nations.

Asia’s “War on Drugs” is disproportionately putting women behind bars, many of whom are drug couriers from Latin America. Women accused of lower-level drug trafficking sometimes receive longer sentences than higher-ranking men. In 2019 in Malaysia, 95% of prisoners on death row for drug trafficking were women, and 70% were men charged with the same offense. Women are often coerced into drug trafficking because they are often more economically vulnerable and therefore easily manipulated. These women are usually poor, struggling to provide for their families and trying to escape poverty. In 2015, Keishu Mercedes Gutierrez Alvarez, a Venezuelan citizen, was arrested for drug trafficking. During her week-long trial, she described her experience of being held captive for several weeks and experiencing physical and sexual assault before being forced into bringing the drugs to Hong Kong. The officers involved in her arrest admitted to never having received training relating to human trafficking, never offering medical assistance to Alvarez, and not following up on the information she provided about her captors until months later. In 2016 Alvarez was found guilty by the jury and sentenced to 25 years in prison for one count of trafficking a dangerous drug; unfortunately, Alvarez’s story is just one of many.

The War on Drugs in Asia has been going on for well over a decade, and the death penalty for drug offenders is on the rise. Only this year, Malaysia’s government passed a bill removing the mandatory death sentence for drug trafficking. Although there are fights for change, half of the world’s countries that enforce capital punishment for drug-related crimes are in Asia. Several countries in Asia still allow whipping, lashing, and caning for those accused of drug use. The brutal legal policies relating to drug control overly criminalize those already on the margins of society or those dependent on drugs, with consequences spreading to their families and communities. It is commonly recognized that most prisons in the world are designed and run based on the needs of the majority male prison population. There is no access to gender-specific healthcare in Malaysia while on death row. In Southeast Asia, female prisoners are often sent to correctional facilities far from their homes, further decreasing the likelihood of social reintegration prospects and contact with their families.

In recent years, there has been an increase in research focusing on the circumstances leading to women’s offending and their experiences in prison. Their findings encourage the reforming of laws, the development of training programs to ensure gender-sensitive management of prisoners, and the abolishment of the death penalty for drug offenses. Implementing rehabilitation and social reintegration may combat the overcrowding issues in Asia’s prisons and their limited resources. The UNODC is pushing for sentencing reform to focus on “traffickers that run the drug trade,” not the couriers “disposable to organized crime” in hopes that these women achieve full access to justice.



INTRODUCTION TO THE PERPLEXING POLITICS OF SERBIA

BY MATTHEW PLOYHART

MATTHEW IS A MEMBER OF THE PENDULUM STAFF AND IS STUDYING ABROAD IN SERBIA THIS SEMESTER.

After living in Serbia for only one week, I had already been told three times that if I could disentangle the complex history and politics of the Balkans, then I was capable of figuring it out anywhere. Having been here now for several months, and having traveled all around the Western Balkans – within and outside Serbia – I can affirm that this does indeed appear to be true. The Balkan region has a complicated history, and this history influences its politics in many ways.

In some parts very hilly and mountainous, and in others, flat and sprawling, much of the communities of the region remained in isolation – both from the rest of the world, and from each other – for much of its history. Centered snugly between East and West, North and South, the Balkan countries have been subject to influence, intervention, and sometimes even occupation throughout history: the Ottomans, Austrians, Italians, Hungarians, Russians, Germans, British,

Americans, and others have played a major part in the region's history in some way. The diversity that has resulted is nothing less than an impressive collection of unique ethnic and cultural groups, sharing between themselves many differences as well as many similarities.

The region is often regarded as one of conflict and instability. Although this perception could be countered with historical examples (such as the relative peace under the Ottoman Empire or Josip Broz "Tito's" Yugoslavia), there are many other instances that would support this viewpoint. The Balkans were once known as the "powder keg of Europe," and this designation proved itself accurate when the tensions leading to the First World War were finally ignited in Sarajevo (present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina) by the pistol of Gavrilo Princip as he assassinated the Archduke of Austria-Hungary and his wife in June 1914. More recently, the conflicts of the 1990s were host to significant violence, ethnic cleansing, and genocide, claiming about 140,000 lives. Millions more were displaced.

Serbia – a midsize country in the central Balkans – is not immune to any of these disruptions; in fact, it has often been central to them, including in recent history. During the conflicts of the 1990s, for instance, although most experts contend that atrocities were committed by all sides, they nonetheless blame Serbia and Serb-dominated paramilitaries for committing the majority of them. As one would expect regarding such a recent conflict, the opinions of those from different regions and backgrounds on the causes, victims, and blame, for the war are extremely diverse.

Throughout my time in Serbia, I have spoken with and had the opportunity to hear from a combination of ordinary citizens, professors, political and economic experts, and government officials; been exposed to a variety of different viewpoints; and have been told many different stories and versions of history regarding past and present politics. It would be impossible to articulate the current political circumstances of Serbia, and the opinions of its experts and citizens on these matters, in a single article (furthermore, I do not feel that my knowledge on this subject is anywhere near complete, having been here for only a few months), but I do intend to provide a concrete outline that summarizes, generally, some of the biggest issues facing the country.

One of my first impressions of the opinions of many (though far from all) of the country's population was from a man in his twenties who I spoke with during the first weeks of my stay. In casual conversation, the topic of the recent Russo-Ukrainian War emerged, and when I asked who he supported, he replied (cautious to articulate himself, yet also to create emphasis), "I am, one hundred percent, on Russian side." This is indicative of broad Serbian support for Russia: the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace report that "51 percent of Serbs believed Russia to be Serbia's most important international partner, while 66 percent called Russia the country's 'greatest friend.'" Furthermore, "as many as 63 percent of polled Serbs held the West responsible for the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war." One of the individuals I interviewed for this article – a bartender in his mid-twenties who was happy to contribute to my research but preferred to remain anonymous (henceforth he will be referred to as Interviewee 1) – stated the following: "personally, I'm not for all these murders and everything in Ukraine. I think [diplomacy] is better than weapons. But, I support Putin because he is president of Russia, and Russia is mother."

What Interviewee 1 was citing was Serbia's long history of friendship with Russia. When Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia in 1914 for the killing of their Archduke (though Serbia's responsibility for this has largely been discredited), Russia declared war on Austria-Hungary in support of Serbia (there is even a statue of Tsar Nicholas II by one of the parliament buildings and the Presidency in the city center – an impressive portrayal of the Russian leader who brought the country into the war, holding a lowered sword and gazing ahead with a calm yet devoted stare). Despite past tensions between Russia and the former Yugoslavia, which included what is now Serbia, Russia nonetheless continues to support Serbia in many of their current political struggles (including not recognizing Kosovo – a country that claimed independence from Serbia in 2008). However, there are also skeptics who say that Russia does this out of self-interest to increase Serbian dependency on Russia and destabilize the Balkans. One of these skeptics, from the Carnegie Endowment, stated that “Moscow has long capitalized on lingering ethnic Serb resentment at the 1999 NATO campaign that led to the establishment of Kosovo as an independent state.” Yet many are convinced that this is certainly not based on Russian self-interest, as evidenced by significant Serbian support of Russia in the Russo-Ukrainian War. This support also stems from other reasons, however, such as media influence and social connections and perceptions. My interview with Interviewee 1 continued as follows:

“So you don't support the violence [in Ukraine]?”

“Yes, I don't like violence, but I like Putin....I support Russia in this war to win and everything, but I [don't] support violence and everything. I have so many friends who go in Russian army.”

Of course, opinions about the conflict tend to differ among other citizens. Another individual I interviewed, Minja Rogan – a journalism student at Belgrade University in her twenties – said that though she would not support increased federal leniency toward Putin's Russia, she believes that “Russia is a great friend of Serbia; they are two Slavic nations with a long tradition of friendship. Certainly, I think that Serbia should be guided by its own interests. It is in Serbia's interest to be a European country in the European Union.” Nevertheless, still many Serbians support Russia over the EU path.

Regarding Russia, opinions are diverse, and the Serbian government's path forward is unclear. The current President (and former Prime Minister) of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić and his prime minister, Ana Brnabic, are at the center of this controversy. Interviewee one, in regards to Vučić's stance on the issue, stated, “I don't know what [the situation is] now. What Vučić do now...I think he's for [Russia], but I don't know what's going on.”

Minja Rogan, when asked if she sees Serbia's moves to join the EU as a betrayal of Russia, replied no, and furthermore stated that “I see Serbia's entry into the European Union as the only correct path for Serbia. Serbia is a European country and cannot be isolated from the place to which it belongs geographically.” She added that Russia would not necessarily see this as a betrayal, claiming that “Russia knows that Serbia wants to join the European Union and they are fine with that.” Still, however, many criticize Vučić's drive to bring Serbia into the EU, claiming it is at best, half-hearted, and at worst, merely an empty publicity show.

Some steps Westward may explain this perception of uncertainty

regarding Vučić's stance on the future of Serbia. Serbia applied for European Union membership in 2009, and has been a candidate state since 2012, according to the European Commission. This means that they must improve aspects of their country (such as the government, infrastructure, and technology) before they will be officially permitted membership in the EU. One of the government employees I had the pleasure to speak with, who requested that I only refer to him as a "government official" and shall henceforth be referred to as Govt. Off. 1, remarked how important entering the European Union is for Serbia. According to him, Serbia's "main foreign policy and goal is European integrations." In order to do that, national structures must be aligned to EU standards. The benefits of working toward EU membership, he asserted, would be the increased stability and predictability of the environment. This goal seems extremely popular in parliament, most of which, he claimed, supports the drive toward EU membership.

However, he notes that this desire has been significantly complicated by the recent war in Ukraine, which severely limits the maneuvering space of Serbia, caught between Russia and the West. This is largely because the country is reliant on Russian energy sources, and they have received support from Russia in the United Nations security council, in their not giving recognition to Kosovo. Serbia, for instance, has not imposed any sanctions on Russia. Serbia was heavily sanctioned in the 1990s, and many Serbs are therefore quite opposed to sanctions in general, as the country was largely choked off by the rest of the world for years. "I don't know why European countries are putting so much emphasis on sanctions," Govt. Off. 1 remarked. He also noted that Serbia had voted in favor of mechanisms that would investigate Russia for war crimes in Ukraine, and that their trade with Russia has already been hindered due to the difficulty of transporting goods through countries that have imposed sanctions. The bottom line? According to Govt. Off. 1, Serbia is not pro-Russian, yet the recent conflict is forcing them to tread narrower waters, particularly as it pertains to their desire for EU membership. As he stated, some countries are basically saying: "sanction Russia or no EU path."

Another, even higher-ranking official (Govt. Off. 2) who I had the privilege to meet with similarly stressed how the war in Ukraine has complicated matters in Serbia significantly. Russia, he stated, is the basis for energy in Europe. He made it clear that Serbia does not support Russia's invasion of Ukraine; yet, Russia is the "engine of Europe," and, according to Govt. Off. 2, it is difficult to maintain a strong political attitude, because at the end of the day, Serbia needs oil, and it needs gas, and that oil and gas mostly comes from Russia. "I'm fighting for my people," he stated: Serbia takes "Serbian side." Right now, that means keeping vital trade lines open with Russia.

However, he also believed in prioritizing integration into the EU. The economic benefits of doing so alone are enough to motivate many in that direction. Politics, he stated, are very motivated by economics. Serbia has a large stake in the Open Balkan initiative, a recent development which strives to relax border restrictions, establish trade agreements, and create a common free market between the participating countries, very similar to how the EU operates (the United States, in fact, is perhaps the biggest supporter of the Open Balkan initiative, claimed Govt. Off. 2).

Govt. Off. 2 pointed out that there are several factors that make this process much easier than one would expect, among them the language similarities

across the Balkans. For Serbia and other Balkans nations, waiting for the European Union to admit them has proved tiresome. Thus, taking into consideration the priority of economics in much of Serbia's foreign policy, this initiative seems appealing to many. Govt. Off. 2 claimed that Serbia is "on a good road to establish, strategically, very good connections."

Govt. Off. 1 took the same position, stating that the Open Balkan project is a "complementary process" along the path to Serbia's final goal: EU membership. He also stressed that procedures are in line with EU standards, which, it is expected, will make EU integration easier. Opinions were similar for Minja Rogan, who stated that, "the Open Balkans initiative is a good initiative. It is a political and economic zone of only three Balkan countries for now. Any connection with the neighbors is good and I hope that this initiative will be extended to other countries of the Balkans until the entire Balkans become part of the European Union and until they all become part of the Schengen zone."

However, not all Serbian citizens are in favor of EU membership. According to a recent poll reported by Euronews, more Serbians oppose the government's desire to join the EU than support it (44% compared to 35%). For instance, Interviewee 1 was very convinced that joining the EU was a poor course of action. When asked if he supported Serbia becoming an EU member, he replied, "no, because [of] this shit republic. I think [the EU is] broke, now, because...this political situation in whole Europe – euro – is less than last year" (it has decreased in value). "I really don't know why Serbia desire to [be in the] EU. I really don't know why, because [Serbia] is good without EU. But when we go in EU, I think we be in [bad] situation."

However, opinions are very different among others. Minja Rogan professed quite the opposite view: "I believe that Serbia should seriously commit to European integration, not only in appearance and formality. European integration is good for Serbia, Serbia needs the reforms that European integration brings." The "appearance and formality" that Rogan was referencing was the aforementioned seeming lack of truth behind Vučić's professed desire to actually join the EU. Despite the massive benefits that such integration with much of the rest of Europe would entail, Vučić's government is still balancing thin lines: between East and West, and maintaining voter support. Yet, Rogan sees the EU as a key to Serbia's future success: "Serbia is a country in Europe geographically, culturally and historically, and Serbia should be a member of the European Union as soon as possible."

In addition to EU membership, one of the most recurring and persistent political issues in Serbia, at least as it is perceived by many, is the issue of Kosovo. Its independence has been heavily contested by Serbia since it was announced in 2008, despite various attempts to reach a compromise, as well as in past negotiations, most recently in Brussels. According to Reuters, "over the past decade the two [Serbia and Kosovo] have been holding normalization talks under EU mediation, with their success key for Pristina's and Belgrade's aspirations to join the wealthy bloc." As illustrated by Govt. Off. 1, the issue of Kosovo complicates Serbia's path to EU membership, especially because their politicians, ideally, are supposed to represent the national interest, much of which is against Kosovar independence. He also stressed that this is not explained by divisions within the EU (for instance, countries such as Spain and Germany, he claimed, want Serbia to join the EU). Govt. Off. 1 cited what he perceived as an increase in ethnically-

based incidents against Serbs in Kosovo, as well.

Among Serbians, the question of the illegitimacy of Kosovo is in most cases a clear one. When asked to briefly describe her opinions concerning Kosovo's proclaimed legitimacy as an independent state, Rogan replied, "Kosovo is an autonomous province of Serbia. Kosovo is part of the territory of Serbia. Any separation of Kosovo from Serbia is unconstitutional according to the Serbian constitution. I am aware that many European countries see Kosovo as an independent country. However, I think that the Kosovo issue will open a Pandora's box for many countries in the world that have territorial problems." These territorial problems include situations in countries such as Spain (the Eastern province of Catalonia having declared its unrecognized independence in 2017) and Cyprus (the island-country being divided between Greeks and Turks). For these countries (both of which are in the EU), fears abound that recognizing Kosovo could provoke the notion that local separatist movements have some legitimacy.

According to a 2017 survey of the opinions of Serbians regarding Kosovo, "only seven percent answered that the best solution for Serbia would be Kosovo as an independent state." However, it should also be noted that the same survey reported that "only eight percent of respondents told the survey that they think solving the Kosovo issue should be the most important priority" Other factors, such as health and economic issues, and especially meeting the requirements of EU integration, largely take center stage. However, European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell recently made it clear that "implementing commitments from both sides [Serbia and Kosovo] is a precondition for their integration into the EU," according to RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. Borrell was present for talks on normalizing relations in North Macedonia in March 2023.

There have been minor steps toward compromise in recent years. For example, according to Govt. Off. 2, following the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022, negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia were opened to ensure stability. A significant amount of trade, he also mentioned, exists between the territories. Yet the topic of independence for Kosovo is complicated on other levels that are not purely economic or political. Much of the electrical system is shared between the two territories, as well as personal connections that many in Kosovo have in parts of Serbia. Additionally, Serbs can claim Kosovo as the site of much of their history; for example, a significant number of Serbian monasteries are located in Kosovo (many of which are listed as at risk or under threat of destruction or vandalism). Serbians have also cited mistreatment of ethnic minorities, particularly Serbs, through the neglect of Kosovar government institutions. Yet, the self-proclaimed and partly-recognized country is majority Albanian (92.9%), not Serb, and atrocities and violations of human rights committed during the war in 1999 (by both sides, but predominately by Serbia) have further contributed to a sense of rejection toward Serbia among the Kosovars.

The matter of Kosovo deserves its own essay, as the situation is far too complex to properly summarize here (one of my interviewees, who had a strong opinion on the matter, declined to talk on this subject because it is so complex and deserves so much time to deliberate and examine), yet some of it can be understood in that, within Serbia, where I have had the privilege to meet with politicians, liberal opposition leaders, former diplomats and student activists, and current university students, even the most open-minded among them have not made any clear effort to go as far to endorse Kosovo's legitimacy as a sovereign

and independent nation. Having spent time in both of the territories of central and northern Serbia and Kosovo, the extent of the divergence of opinion on the matter of the latter's independence – and the number of injustices committed against either ethnic side – between the two territories is quite pronounced. However there are some potential steps forward. “We are trying to be proactive to put all problems aside,” Govt. Off. 2 asserted. Maintaining stability in the region is, it would seem, a significant priority.

Yet, how well does the current government actually represent the voices and opinions of the Serbian citizenry? Not very well, claim many sources. Critics cite Vučić's government as being extremely self-interested and willing to go to great lengths to preserve its own power. Additionally, as reported by Euractiv, many news networks are supported by state finances. They went as far as to cite a report by the international NGO, Reporters Without Borders, claiming that “Serbia is a country ‘with weak institutions that is prey to fake news spread by government-backed sensational media, a country where journalists are subjected to almost daily attacks that increasingly come from the ruling elite and pro-government media.’” Overall, the country is currently ranked 93rd worldwide (much worse than in previous years) regarding media freedom. According to the Serbian Monitor, as of November, 2022, “the majority of interviewed people trust only the media with a pro-government editorial policy.”

Furthermore, in terms of elections, several individuals who I have spoken with stated that federal employees who fail to provide proof of voting for the incumbent government officials will lose their jobs. “Years of increasing state capture, abuse of power, and strongman tactics employed by President Aleksandar Vučić are among the motivations of the downgrade of Serbia to ‘hybrid regime,’” according to the Italian Institute for International Political Studies, citing Freedom House.

Rogan, when asked about the government, replied: “I think that the current government in Serbia is not guided by the interests of the citizens. I think that corruption is something that is very prevalent in politics in Serbia and I think that it is a very big problem.” Furthermore, she went on to state, “I think the government is selfish. It is guided exclusively by its own interests, it is very corrupt. People who are unqualified for certain higher positions get those positions only because they are members of the leading party.”

Even among more-conservatively minded individuals, Vučić and his government are a controversial matter. One very conservative and nationalistic man I spoke with stated how Vučić is weak and a poor leader. Interviewee 1's response was much more detailed:

“Do you think that the current government administration is adequately serving the interests of its citizens?”

“Certain government is not responding for all of this shit that happens now. Before president and everything is bad. This is not last ten or twenty years; this is last eighty years, almost, before president Tito, and everything. This is Serbia, and if you don't have money to buy your position in government, you are nothing.”

“Some critics claim that Vučić's government is self-interested. Would you agree with that?”

“Yes, yes, absolutely yes...In my village, where I am from, [if] villagers put their voice on Vučić...[then] Vučić make new roads for [them]....My family,

and my neighbors in my village, [do not put their] voice on Vučić, and [he gives] nothing for us...People who vote for [him] have more benefits than others...[Those who support him get] some position for employers...If I am not in Vučić party, I can't apply in school, like a teacher...All people who working in like a school or like a hospital or like country jobs all need [the] party – Vučić party.”

Resentment towards Vučić was felt especially strongly amongst the members of opposition groups, including one of its leaders, whom I had the opportunity to hear from. However, this sense of injustice even extends into the current government administration itself, albeit on a more mild level. Govt. Off. 1, when prompted to describe how he came to acquire his current position, replied that it was through luck and having a friend already in politics. He admitted how difficult it is to enter the political system without either money or connections.

Nevertheless, there are reasons for optimism. Several experts I have spoken with stressed how far Serbia and its government have come since the times of Milošević, whose rule over the late Yugoslavia is widely looked at as extremely unjust and self-interested, and having promoted, as well as participated in, genocide and ethnic violence for a decade until his ousting in 2001. While there are many Serbians who maintain their admiration for the former government, compared to what many describe as a bloody and unjust recent past, reasons for optimism can be found in Serbia's current political situation.

To conclude this brief (and I mean brief) overview of some of the current political situations facing Serbia today, it is hard to believe that there are reasons for optimism. The country, and Serbs as an ethnic group in general, have wavered between extremes of existence. The region referred to as the Western Balkans has enjoyed relative stability under the former Ottoman Empire (though this came at the cost of defeat at the hands of the empire) and within the borders of communist Yugoslavia; yet, it has also been the stage for intense violence and political turmoil, from the World Wars in the first half of the twentieth century to the conflicts of the 1990s. Today, much of the population of Serbia is extremely divided among ethnic and political lines, and both liberals and conservatives demonstrate a lack of confidence in the country's governing institutions.

However the country of Serbia has come a long way in only a few decades. And though many of the problems throughout the last thirty years have merely deescalated rather than officially concluded, that alone is reason for hope. Although the current political situation is indeed tumultuous, and it does not look like many resolutions will come soon – from the country's admission into the EU to the matter of Kosovo – it is important to remember that history, as a constantly persistent influencing force, leaves stories of success as well as tragedy. One can only hope that the current matters and dilemmas facing Serbia today will resolve in success and not tragedy. As argued by Minja Rogan, “the current political situation in Serbia is complicated. Serbia is currently at a turning point to decide whether it will go to Europe and continue the process of European integration and impose sanctions on Russia or...be isolated from all countries in Europe, which will certainly mean a lot of bad things for Serbia.”



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