State-Building Politics after the Yugoslav and Soviet Collapse – The Western Balkans and Ukraine in a Comparative Perspective

An Introduction

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This issue of the journal *Southeastern Europe* is dedicated to the comparison of political developments and state-building processes in the so-called Western Balkans and the Ukrainian case, which is an emblematic post-Soviet Eastern European country. As any other similar exercise, the comparative framework has its own benefits and limitations. Methodologically and by content, this approach is, in fact, indubitably challenging. On the one hand, comparative studies encourage critical reflections across borders between states or macro-regions. On the other, the quantitative analysis of data, which is more frequently applied in these cases, has been replaced, in this issue, by a different approach, preferably based on the qualitative scrutiny of two case-studies, here encoded in the broader geopolitical notion of “South-East Europe”. Moreover, the preference for a qualitative approach has been here reinforced by the knowledge of native languages by our authors. This expertise is crucially important as it allows access to valuable local (oral and written) sources, in addition to the international ones. In our view, this specific skill, together with the content analysis and the contextual observations which are a full part of the methodology applied in the articles here collected, is helpful for grasping the regional dynamics and their local perceptions in a more comprehensive and in-depth way.

Although Lijphart (1971) was originally uncertain about whether to include case-studies in the assessment of comparative research, their role in generating hypotheses and/or testing them became the focus of a notoriously vivid

debate in the 1970s and the 1980s, with the contributions of Campbell (1975), Yin (1984), and George and McKeown (1985), just to mention a few among the prominent scholars that took part in the public debate. The arguments, as is well known, concerned in particular the estimation of the case-studies' effectiveness for hypothesis testing. Since then, however, scholars in foreign policy comparative analysis have employed a variety of methodologies, by including case-studies when considered useful in order to understand specific decisions or the mechanisms that suggest how and why policymaking processes change or evolve (Kaarbo & Beasley 1999; Beach & Pedersen 2013).

In our view, once again, what is particularly attractive in the implementation of comparative approaches is their inherent violation of disciplinary borders.

Institutionally, comparison encourages invasion into others' disciplines, looking for new contextual analyses, decision making mechanisms, cultural and psychological mindsets, social and economic environments, external players' roles, and ideological and religious impacts. Methodologically, the incursion into a variety of fields potentially provides unexplored grounds for innovation. The scrutiny of studies' purposes, in fact, can benefit from a fusion of inputs. The syncretism, which follows, is inevitably generated by the interaction of interpretations and the examination of different kinds of sources. Indeed, such a comprehensive attitude requires a high degree of cultural curiosity, a post-modern will of studying the peculiarities of specific contexts, by approaching them with new lenses, which are stemming from either the interdisciplinary methods, or the openness to the "other", to networks and diversities (Rivkin-Fish & Tubina 2010; Fahy Bryceson, Okely & Webber 2007). As a result, it may produce an "interpretative métissage", which can contribute to represent more effectively the intricacy of regional realities. And language knowledge, in this case, matters remarkably.

Furthermore, both interdisciplinarity and openness deal with fluidity, as this is the main characteristic of our time. Broadly speaking, the interaction among disciplines is crucial for understanding the complexity of world phenomena, which are increasingly affecting the international unipolarity, traditional social homogeneity, and existing social links and forms of communications. On the other hand, the meeting with "otherness", with the image (or the perception) of the "foreigner", is reflecting a dual process of acceptance and rejection that marks, under different aspects and circumstances, the relations among human beings, their identity, sensitivity, and their degree of coexistence, by vastly expanding the fields of studies.

In our specific case, the comparative approach inherent in the selected case-studies offers, under this theoretical framework, a stimulating opportunity to compare differences and similarities not only between two, or more, political

systems, but also between socio-cultural self-constructions and self-awareness of the dynamics affecting state-building, domestic governance, relations with neighbors, and the expectations of inclusiveness within a world (namely, the West) which is believably evaluated in South-East Europe and Eastern Europe as successful and wealthy (Petrović 2014).

In addition, the comparative analysis of case-studies diachronically closer to recent times suggests careful considerations of their historical legacies and, particularly, of the radical crisis that is shaking the idea of nation and its conceptualization. Crossing multiple borders by methodology, the comparison is overcoming the scrutiny of a single narrative by framing it under a wider context of multiple narratives the focus of which is primarily highlighting the transversal markers of different situations.

Under these circumstances, the polarization between the “local” and the “global” is growing. At the same time, this tension is symbolized by the trend towards deterritorialization, which is promoted by transnational corporations, cultural interactions and transformations, new technologies with the digital development of the cyberspace, financial markets, and organized criminality and, recently, fundamentalist terrorism. By contrast, forms of reterritorialization are also emerging with identity demands, and a potential basis on religion, tribalism, racism, nationalism, populist sovereignism, or ancestry.

In other words, the simultaneous “annihilation and reproduction” of the local forms of culture is occurring in a globalizing environment where boundaries matter not so much geographically, but more culturally, socially, economically, psychologically, and according to the divergent imaginations of both reality and otherness. These boundaries do not coincide with traditional state borders, but represent new social walls that oppose transversal (and transnational) confrontational groups.

Already in the 1980s Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) warned about the mutual connection that marks the relation between the processes of deterritorialization and those of reterritorialization. Zygmunt Bauman (2000) has described these dynamics as a product of modernity, based on the reiteration of liquefaction and solidification of new bodies, where the fluidity of the patterns of dependencies and interactions impact the forms of power. Consistently, the control over space (or, differently said, the universe), the access to even faster means of communication and mobility, as well as the profits that are stemming from the cycle of high-speed circulation, and the process of recycling, obsolescence, disposal, and replacement, are vigorously contributing to redesigning the levers of power, increasingly based on speed rather than space.

After all, the effects of these movements are accelerated by the time-space compression, as Paul Virilio (1977 and 2012) and David Harvey (1990) have

effectively elaborated in their masterworks. The time-space compression, in fact, is progressively determining the present and the future of social relations, including the ways in which mankind relates to power. Under these circumstances, people increasingly polarize both politically and culturally, while confronting the effects and the costs of the growing speed and the impact of space-shrinking around the world. Furthermore, the building of new infrastructures modifies radically the perception of territory, by making urban areas closer (due to airport connections and high speed trains), but mentally moving the cities away from their countryside because of the slowness of the communication routes. Consequently, the gaps between culturally equipped peoples and unprepared masses to face the implications of the time-space compression, multiplied by the Internet and social networks, is deepening (and is doomed to be further deepened) *within* and *across* countries.

This transnational and intense process of change crucially implies that an influential role is played not only by the development of the world economy, the volatility of financial assets, and the interstate dependency stemming from currency variations, trade, customs policies, migration flows, mutual sanctions etc., which are anyhow relevant and powerful, but also by culture, that is by the ability to understand diversities and accept them throughout a practice of “creating, re-creating and negotiating” the mental boundaries between “us” and “them” (Harzig & Juteau with Schmitt 2003), with inevitable impacts on the ways the state-building process is pursued.

In other words, since the industrial revolution, the need of culture and mass education is notoriously a remarkable prerequisite for growth and technological requirements to such an extent that intellectuals have been invited to, and actually have, played the role of the “clergy of the nation” (Gellner 1983). In post-modern times, however, this need has become even stronger, although with different characteristics. Interdependency and mobility are, in fact, new determinant factors of social progress, by promoting a higher level of interculturality, which calls for a greater knowledge of “otherness” and a polity of flexibility, pluralism, egalitarian reciprocity, and new models of institutional powersharing (Behabib 2002).

Nonetheless, such cultural policy is far from being implemented systematically, at least right now. Governmental strategies on culture, educational systems, media and communication links are facing the more advanced needs of culture by counting on approaches which are still deeply anchored in nation-state cultural legacies. Such a substantially backward attitude contrasts with the demands of privileged groups of people (whose social origins are not necessarily homogeneous or belonging to higher social strata), who access the cultural requirements of equality and diversity in the global world.

As a result, a disoriented, insufficiently educated, sedentary population is facing an increasingly faster upheaval of its everyday reality, with consequences that are still to be understood and measured by politics. By contrast, another component of the population is becoming even more mobile, nomadic, multilingual, inclined to syncretism, and with a multi-identity spirit (Braidotti 2011). Its links with the territory are so weak that its attitude is likely to appear as a sort of post-modern revenge against the predominant sedentary lifestyle and settlement of the last centuries.

Admittedly, the divergence of these phenomena can hardly be appeased, because they both articulate alternative cultural claims, political narratives, and social needs in an historical phase, as our own is, which is typified by a technological and scientific acceleration, able to liquefy and re-solidify, in different forms, human relations within an increasingly hectic pace of time.

Under these circumstances, the consistency of states, especially when based on the solidification of blood and territory, is challenged by the growing speed of world movement and, therefore, by the transformation of the forms of power, with unexpected effects on their supposed stability, either territorially or constitutionally.

As a consequence, a variety of dynamics of dismemberment and recomposition are characterizing the existing transversal networks, the implications of which are particularly shaking the “peripheral areas” of the “core states”, if one would like to apply the terminology suggested by Immanuel Wallerstein (1976) when he elaborated, in his seminal studies, a comparative analysis of the dynamics that mark the establishment of the modern capitalist world.

In our current European context, we can assume that the core states are represented by the EU member-states, having in mind – with some approximations – the enlarged EU until 2013. Consequently, the most immediate peripheral area is embodied by the Western Balkans and Ukraine (together with Belarus and Moldavia). Admittedly, and according to the Wallerstein’s definition, weak state structures are characteristic of these regions, with a degree of autonomy that largely depends on the role played by external players (Great Powers). Moreover, compared to other post-socialist countries of Central and Baltic Europe, their transition suffered from further, tragic, shortcomings as soon as the stability imposed by the “two-camp confrontation” of the Cold War years vanished (Holmes 1997, Krasteva & Privitera 2006).

In fact, in addition to the structural transformation of their economies and their geopolitical reorientation, which basically affected the whole area of the former “socialist camp”, their societies all had to face deep identity crises, including the collapse of institutions, trends toward fragmentation, and wars — with the exception of Belarus, and although in different decades, as it will be

seen later, the Yugoslav socialist federation, Moldova, and Ukraine had to face hostilities and a violent process of state partition, which postponed for years any attempt at structural reforms, institutional modernization, and policies of inclusiveness either within the state (with regard to different minorities or the degree of otherness acceptance, already rooted in the society), or in relation to the EU (Woodward 1995; Vachudová 2005; Berend 2009).

So, under these new conditions, when the Cold War was over and these states had to reconfigure their international role, as well as the making of their development, the phenomenon of partitions was to a large extent a manifestation of (if not a reaction to) the inability of the local leaderships to cope with the radical transformations imposed by the evolution of “liquid modernity”, the speed of the time-space compression, and the varieties of syncretism that historical legacies have enhanced over the centuries (Bianchini 2017). By contrast, their aggressive domestic attitude to claim a reterritorialization under a supposed new homogeneous identity had the effect of partially annihilating the nomadic component of their society, and partially enhancing their “brain drain” as well as the attraction to deterritorialized behaviours and lifestyles.

As a consequence of these dynamics, the new states suffered from weaknesses in several critical spheres, from institutional constructions to operational governance, from welfare to economic performances, from corruption to the judiciary, from security to neighbour relations. Under these conditions, traditional Great Powers (and sometimes also new external players) interfered extensively with the development of events, seeking out their own strategic benefits, and the establishment (or the expansion, or the protection) of their spheres of influence, since the vulnerability of the newly-emerging peripheral areas was offering attractive space for strengthening their interests. However, and to a large extent, these behaviours occurred when the local fragility became internationally adamant.

Meanwhile, at the domestic level, local leaderships concentrated their effort to narrowly connect the governance with the territory, by redefining the requirements for loyalty from individuals (as nationals, rather than citizens). In this context, social, cultural, and ethno-national forms of homogenization, together with the (re-)establishment of institutional centralization, began to prevail in the peripheries of the European core states, facilitating by contrast a widespread depopulation, the decline of social motivations, and the enhancement of external mobility, which led to social and cultural impoverishment. In some cases, this happened even before the post-socialist transition had really started; in other cases, such phenomena postponed the beginning of transition to the undefined future. Even so, security, stability, and democratic development

were deeply affected since the time the process of change was supposed to have initiated.

This also explains why the direction of the reforms has been (and still is) often biased, unable to measure itself with the constellation of the variables that the institutional framework potentially offers in order to meet the multiple demands of society. For example, the rigidity that, in some of the peripheral areas under scrutiny in this issue, marks the debate over the centralization/decentralization of public administration, or the special status that might be arranged for a specific region, is a crucial factor that contributes to obstructing the search for a solution to the controversy.

As a result, conflicts can become frozen, but not settled. International agreements cannot be implemented or, simply, are unable to break down the mistrust that has been built over time. Alternatively, they have been negotiated with irreducible parties, whose peaceful coexistence is guaranteed by the military force of external players, but does not have any result regarding the effectiveness of governance. Meanwhile, vexed questions of borders and loyalties have acquired new priorities, with implications that are still affecting a variety of aspects.

As mentioned above, the comparative analysis of the case-studies considered for this issue confirms, despite the difference of contexts, that new borders have been erected not only geographically, but also mentally. Partitions concern territories, as well as majority-minorities dynamics, local communities, habits, the access to fundamental rights, and the future of human relations — whether family, parental, or friendship correspondence. Partition is, in fact, a process of vertical and multilevel dividing, which is comprehensive and merciless because it forces individuals to make a choice which impacts their sense of belonging and their feelings. It forges a new idea of the “in” and the “out”, of the foreigner, and of diversity (Iveković-Mostov 2002).

Most of these aspects can be identified in the making of new nation-/state-building processes in the peripheral areas. However, and to a large extent unexpectedly, similar phenomena are contagiously affecting the European core states, despite their common mythological EU narrative of inclusion, which has been, however, restricted, after great uncertainties, as far as the Western Balkans only. Particularly, the migration/refugee crisis of 2015–2016 has awakened in the core states a widespread feeling of rejection of the otherness that was deemed to have been eradicated forever after ww2 and the apparently successful European integration. By contrast, it almost seems that the peripheral areas have anticipated a local, but *transnational* reaction to the global (what a paradox!) in the core states, as the recent general elections in Austria,

Italy, and Sweden have confirmed, while potential partitions are affecting both the United Kingdom and Spain.

However, it is under these contradictory, if not conflictual, conditions, that the Western Balkans (and partially also Ukraine) are putting their hopes of stabilization, progress, and democratization into the perspective of EU integration, when neither the peripheral areas, nor the core states have seriously settled their accounts with the mobile and fluid identities, the four EU liberties, the cultural syncretism, and the *métissages* that are predominant in Europe, due to the long-term impact of diasporas, religious competitions across borders, infrastructural settings (including canals, rivers, railways, motorways, airports, internet, social networks), and the free circulation of arts, science, and ideas (Bianchini 2015).

The binary comparison, which is the focus of the four contributions collected for this issue of the *Southeastern Europe Journal*, concerns systems and areas which share similarities in contexts that, however, preserve their peculiarities and differences, either at the domestic level or in their international position. All that considered, however, the case-studies here scrutinized can give us special stimuli for understanding some of the dynamics that can be grasped also in the broader European environment.

This is not surprising. Despite their peripheral condition, in fact, the areas under scrutiny are not isolated from the core states. On the contrary, they are deeply permeated by the mutual dynamics that concern trade, diplomacy, people's mobility, tourism, cultural links, and political proximity with their neighbours. In some cases, they have also established forms of military cooperation with Euro-Atlantic institutions or host military bases. Consequently, the flow of contacts, information, and interdependences which is under way manifests a growing intensity and explains why, in a shrinking and more and more speedy world, some social "peripheral" dynamics may anticipate processes of liquefaction and re-solidification that are then emerging in the core states, even if policy makers have often considered their countries immune to such trends.

Actually, and for a long time, the major comparative approach to post-Yugoslav and post-Soviet countries was connected with communist federalism and the dissolution of these federations during democratization attempts (see e.g.: Bunce 1999; Leff 1999; Lukic & Lynch 1999). Later, the comparison was widened and involved other post-communist countries that were measured across democratization and capitalist transition (Haerpfer 2003; Pickles & Smith 2005; Lane & Myant 2007). However, with post-Soviet Eastern Europe sinking into the new era of internal and international conflicts, the comparative perspective has changed again: the experiences of war and conflict resolution in countries of the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe are of interest again.

Today, as is said, the two regions have a different situation and dynamics. The Yugoslav succession wars (1991–2001) have ended seventeen years ago, and afterwards, the post-Yugoslav political transformations have been directed by peaceful integration in the contexts of EU accession and regional cooperation. On the contrary, after a short conflict period in 1991–94 following the dissolution of USSR, post-Soviet Eastern Europe (constituted of Belarus, Georgia, Moldavia, Russia, and Ukraine, as well as the six un-recognized states of Abkhazia, Donetsk People's Republic, Luhansk People's Republic, Nagorno Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria) has slowly been entering the period of military conflicts, first in Georgia (Russo-Georgian war, 2008) and then in Eastern Ukraine (Donbas war and Crimean annexation, since 2014). Eastern Europe is one of the fastest-militarizing regions of the world, with armies, elites, and peoples' hostility growing. Thus, the regional political and security trends are different in the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

However, even though these regional trends are contradictory, there are commonalities that cannot be ignored and demand comparative analysis. We would point out several, but not all, of these:

Failed state effect. The nations, states, and economies in both regions were born as a result of state failure in two socialist federations, Yugoslavia and the USSR. Post-Soviet and post-Yugoslav political and economic systems have been launched as the consequences of the state failure.

War as the context of state- and nation-building. The post-Yugoslav states started their collective lives in the conditions of decade-long war. Post-Soviet countries in Eastern Europe were less impacted by war: Georgia and Moldavia (and those territories that separated from them) were going through difficult war periods in the beginning of their independent existence, while Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine avoided it in the early 1990s. However, the Ukrainian crisis has deeply changed state- and nation-building dynamics in the Eastern European countries in the second decade of the 21st century: wars and conflicts became the leading factors of political, economic, and social development here (Nodia et al. 2017; Minakov 2017 and 2018).

Considerable role of non-state-actors during war is another common feature for post-Yugoslav and post-Soviet conflict periods. In these periods the emerging Balkan states and post-Maidan Ukraine were barely able to respond to security challenges. Civil society organizations, paramilitary and radical groups, and intellectuals were active participants in conflicts and their possible resolution (Belloni 2008; Shukan & Regamey 2016; Dinstein, 2017; Kudelia 2017). And this phenomenon calls for proper comparative analysis.

Ethnocultural aspects of the war, conflict resolution, and nation-building were highly visible in both cases, and also demand attentive study (Bianchini & Schöpflin 1998; Bianchini 2000).

Finally, the *decisive role of external players* in managing and containing the conflicts is also relevant for our comparative perspective.

In this issue we present four articles that cover all above similarities and differences. Their narratives, however, follow a different comparative approach. Two articles, in fact, suggest a binary in-depth analysis between the two peripheral areas under scrutiny. Instead, the other two contributions focus mainly, although not exclusively, on the specific dynamics that are characterizing each of the two macroregions. Our belief is that, in this way, the reader will more effectively grasp both commonalities and peculiarities of these two complex European strategic zones.

The paper by **Craig Nation** (Carlisle, Pennsylvania) focuses on comparing the wars in the Balkans (1991–2001) and Donbas (2014 till now). The author reviews these two wars as examples of the ways in which armed conflicts are evolving in contemporary Europe. The major thesis of Nation is that the origins of these wars lie in domestic rather than inter-state conflicts, stemming from state failure and the ensuing civil disorder. Both wars constituted the contexts in which new national polities were established, as well as relevant radicalized non-state actors. Another common feature that Craig Nation identifies is the fact that the Balkan and Donbas wars were “liquid conflicts”, where attacks on populations, terroristic operations, and symbolic acts prevailed over military combat. Another important commonality is that both the conflicts were internationalized, and powerful external actors heavily influenced the process and outcomes of the wars. Craig Nation concludes that the described common patterns provide an opportunity to better understand, manage, and contain the conflicts in 21st century Europe.

If Craig Nation focused on similarities of the post-Maidan Eastern Europe and the post-Yugoslav Balkans, **Hanna Shelest** (Odessa, Ukraine) concentrated on differences. Specifically, Shelest pays attention to the resolutions offered by external players for the parties of two conflicts, in Dayton (1995) and in Minsk (2015). According to the suggested solutions, the Dayton and the Minsk peace packages design different state-building and constitutional approaches, as well as some views on federalization. First, Shelest correctly identifies the difference in the political and security contexts when the peaceful solutions were proposed (and sometimes imposed): the Dayton agreement and the respective constitutional architecture were achieved after a NATO military intervention and painful negotiations of a ceasefire in Bosnia and Herzegovina; while the Minsk agreements envisaged constitutional changes parallel to the active phase of the military conflict. Second, even though the role of the external factor is huge in both cases, Ukraine does not require an international protectorate as has been the case for Bosnia-Herzegovina since 1996. Third,

Shelest shows that if Dayton's "segregation-order" based on two entities, with only one of them federalized, was acceptable for the local players, in the case of Ukraine a potential federalization, and even a prospective decentralization, are viewed by several parties as intolerable and as an existential threat to existence of Ukraine.

Marco Puleri (Bologna, Italy) elaborates an in-depth analysis of the different approaches to ethnopolitics — or as he calls it, a "value-based politics" — in Russia and Ukraine in the times of Russo-Ukrainian war (since 2014). This war is limited in its military actions by the frontline in Donbas, but has an entire universe as its cultural domain. Puleri has accurately followed official Moscow and Kyiv policies regulating the field of culture, language, and ethnicity. Simultaneously he shows that these policies were counterweighed by practices of diverse social groups in Ukraine that reacted differently to the official policies and promoted alternative nation-building projects. These actions "from above" and "from below" clash in different ways and thus constitute the meanings of post-Soviet political processes. The author has chosen an approach that provides an opportunity to better grasp the current dynamics of ideological construction, new socio-political hierarchies' formation, and political systems' transformations in Ukraine and Russia.

Finally, **Jelica Minić** (Belgrade, Serbia) studies the post-war Balkan stabilization. Minić illustrates how the EU accession standard and the regional mechanisms of cooperation constituted the infrastructure of the Western Balkans' peace and stability. The author shows that this infrastructure is fragile and dependent on political leaders' behaviour. However, she also demonstrates that there are specific interest groups stretching from the security community to the business elites and academia that play the role of the guardians of peace and cooperation in the region. Minić concludes that the Balkan regional cooperation policy was among the most successful policies of the EU; and the honour of this success is shared by those regional forces which are actively supporting the Western Balkans' integration. Nonetheless, the author also argues that the bilateral relations in the region are not following the macro-regional trend. On the contrary, they are still nurturing conflictual behaviours and uncompromised, opposite memories. Therefore, they may hinder progress in the post-war Balkans.

In conclusion, the comparative approach of this peripheral area highlights an unsettled situation that may appear, in some cases, better internationally structured and on the path of consolidation, while in other cases destabilization is still powerfully affecting the perspective of the nation-/state-building process. Nevertheless, the analysis also reveals that both the regions under scrutiny are still suffering from fragile and fluid contexts, the solidification of

which can also evolve in still unpredictable directions, depending on how and why policymaking processes change or evolve.

We hope, therefore, that this issue will serve to a better understanding of the security and social, political, and cultural challenges in the Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. Furthermore, the comparative approach that we have suggested may also contribute to grasp the potentials that still exist in these regions, in order to achieve convincing results in both conflict resolution and peace-building under a world framework which is increasingly interconnected and exposed to speed pressure, time-space compression, and the local-global polarization.

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