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Protests in the region: why the EU must care about them

In recent weeks, street protests have broken out in Serbia, Montenegro and Albania. First demonstrations started in Serbia at the beginning of December, and they still go on. Every Saturday, citizens parade in central Belgrade, as in other cities of the country. Initially, they demanded more media freedom and more protection for opposition politicians (the protests began after the beating of Borko Stefanovic, a leftist politician). However, the mood has gradually changed. Now protesters question the whole political action of Aleksandar Vucic, Serbia's President and founder of the Progressive Party (SNS), in power since 2012.

Demonstrators, who say they are not supported by any political parties in terms of logistics and money, accuse the President and his party, which has the absolute majority in the Parliament and rules almost all the municipalities of the country, of having built an authoritarian State through tightening its control over justice, media and law enforcement agencies. The slogan of the movement is One out of five million (Jedan od pet miliona). It recalls what Vucic said when protests broke out. "I will not accept demonstrators' demands, even if they will be five millions".

In Montenegro, protests erupted in early February after a controversial banker, Dusko Knezevic, accused the President Milo Djukanovic and his ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), in power since the Nineties, of corruption, cronyism, abuse of office and murky financial deals. Investigative journalists and opposition politicians have told many times that those opaque relations between politics, business and organised crime jeopardize Montenegro's democracy.

Like in Serbia, protests are peaceful, held on Saturdays and mainly coordinate by civil society. Demonstrators ask for Djukanovic's resignation, saying he is the patron of Montenegro's ill system. They also claim that high-ranking judges cover up politicians' dirty games. Djukanovic has ruled out to leave, denying accusations against him and his party. He said that protests are legitimate, unless they become violent.

In Albania, protests began on the 16th of February, after a scandal-plagued plan to build a ring-road around the capital emerged. Prior to that, the country had been shaken by huge demonstrations launched by students. They asked for cutting high fees at universities and improve the public education, badly administered according to them.

Unlike those in Serbia and Montenegro, demonstrations in Tirana have been very tense. The first protest turned violent. People attacked the building hosting the office of the Prime Minister, Edi Rama, a Socialist, demanding his resignation. Fifteen people were injured, including five police officers. The opposition approach marks another difference between the protest in Albania and those in Serbia and Montenegro. In Serbia and Montenegro, opposition does not have a direct role in anti-government marches. In Albania, protests are called and coordinated by the Democratic Party (DP) and the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI), the two opposition parties.

Several media have written that a “Balkan Spring” is blooming. It sounds as a forced attempt to drag protests marked more by differences than similarities into the same framework. Those in Albania, for example, seem more a fight for power than a surge for democracy.

It is not a Balkan Spring, but the European Union should care about these protests. Beyond political disputes, a common trend emerges. There is a growing popular discontent for how these countries are ruled. Albanians, Serbs and Montenegrins are tired of corruption, insufficient democratic standards and lack of economic opportunities. In short: they feel trapped in a limbo. Central European countries joined the EU in 2004, fifteen years after the collapse of communism. Almost thirty years after the collapse of Yugoslavia, and twenty since the last regional conflict (Kosovo), the Western Balkans are still in the waiting process. It begins to be an excessive time politically and socially.

So far, the European enlargement has been primarily perceived in the post-Yugoslav space as an economic opportunity more than a chance to build a real, working democracy. Supporting the hunger for democracy – showed by recent protests – is an opportunity for Europe to reassert its mission in the Balkans and let pass its model before those promoted by other players, like Russia or China, interested in gaining influence in the region.

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