

Interview – Jasmin Mujanović

Written by E-International Relations

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Dr. Jasmin Mujanović is a Political Scientist (Ph.D., York University) specializing in the politics of post-authoritarian and post-conflict democratization. His first book *Hunger and Fury: The Crisis of Democracy in the Balkans* (Hurst Publishers & Oxford University Press, 2018) examines the persistence of authoritarian and illiberal forms of governance in the Western Balkans since the end of the Yugoslav Wars. His publications also include peer-reviewed articles in top-flight academic journals, chapters in numerous edited volumes, policy reports for leading international think tanks and research consortia, as well as popular analyses in *the New York Times*, *the Washington Post*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, and a host of other media. He has a prominent social media presence and makes regular appearances for international television and radio programs including numerous Balkan media outlets. Originally from Sarajevo, he is currently an Advisory Board member of the Kulin Initiative. His next book, *The Bosniaks: Nationhood after Genocide*, will be published by Hurst Publishers in 2023.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I am excited by the growing literature on the Western Balkans and their history seeking to reclaim authentic local accounts and experiences, on their own terms, and not merely in reference to the region's "(non)Europeanization". Dženeta Karabegović and Adna Karamehić-Oates's forthcoming edited volume *Bosnian Studies*, for instance, I suspect will become a paradigmatic work in future scholarly works about Bosnian identity and identity politics, including diaspora politics. Dženeta Karić's *Bosnian Hajj Literature* will also be an important work in complicating (Western) accounts of the role of Islam in Bosnian and Bosniak society. Marko Atilla Hoare's new history of Serbia will also be another major contribution from one of the most significant living historians of the region. I was also quite moved by Ana Sekulić's recent essay on the Ottoman Bosnian Ahdname in *Newlines Magazine*, a publication which incidentally, is publishing some of the most provocative new writing on the Balkans.

How has the way you understand the world shifted over time, and what (or who) prompted the most important shifts your thinking?

I continue to be convinced of the disproportionate significance of the 19th century in understanding the contemporary politics of both the Western Balkans and Europe more broadly. I think one is better off reading Edin Hajdarpašić's *Whose Bosnia?* to understand contemporary national politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina itself, as well as how elites in Zagreb and Belgrade think about the country and its peoples, than most purported "deep dives" into the myriad scandals and crises that animate the country's politics today.

Following my propensity for a kind of *longue durée* understanding of the region's history, I see both the rise of fascism and Marxist-Leninism in the early 20th century as a continuation of the politics of both Germany and Russia, respectively, which also helps to explain how these ideological phenomena manifested in the various occupied countries of Eastern Europe. In practice, I see the outcomes of both, though not necessarily in the original intent (at least as far as the chaos of the Bolshevik Revolution is concerned), as the continuation of existing patterns of German and Russian imperial ambition. Which is not to negate the ideological specificity (and horror) of these regimes, but to suggest that their emergence must be understood in the context of existing political cultures and histories in the polities in which these movements took root.

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For the purposes of the Western Balkans, I think local scholars, especially, have traditionally overestimated the transformative depth of the communist period in the former Yugoslavia. That's not to dismiss the scale of the socio-economic transformation which occurred in the region during this period, such as the shift from overwhelmingly agricultural societies to large-scale industrialization. But the pace of political transformation was far less pronounced than has often been claimed, and the persistence of significant urban-rural divides continues well into the 21st century.

I am therefore perhaps far less surprised by the continued quasi-imperial pretensions that predominate in Zagreb and Belgrade today vis-à-vis Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro and so on, than some of my colleagues who remain vested in the idea that the communist Yugoslav regime represented some categorical rupture in the region's history and are thus cofounded and alarmed by the "re-emergence" and persistence of nationalist politics. I am, of course, also alarmed by these phenomena. However, I see them as a continuation of existing patterns of authoritarian rule and culture in the region, rather than as receding and rising, in turn. This is obviously not to deny, however, that different periods have seen greater or lesser degrees of nationalist mobilization and influence. Nor is it to categorize the Balkans as uniquely predisposed to nationalist politics (which given the state of contemporary American and European politics is obviously false).

In your book *Hunger and Fury: The Crisis of Democracy in the Balkans*, you argue that nationalism in the Western Balkans is an elite-manufactured phenomenon. How does this differ from alternative accounts, and why is it important for our understanding of the region?

The most significant alternative accounts are those "primordialist" narratives which maintain that national identity and nationalism are both organic, authentic expressions of a latent collective identity that has existed among particular peoples for centuries. To me, nationalism is fundamentally both an ideology and a modern political phenomenon. Because as Benedict Anderson identified, the proliferation of nationalism as a collective organizing principle depended on certain technological innovations which themselves were constitutive of modern mass society. You cannot have a "national identity" in a contemporary sense of the term in a society where there is no "national infrastructure," both in physical and intellectual terms. Which is why it is preposterous to claim that the hundreds of disparate feudal polities that dotted the European political landscape during the medieval period, for instance, were each incipient national homelands.

The belief in that kind of collective identity, as well as the association with a particular state, only emerges in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, in a meaningful sense of the term, and could hardly have been said to exist in feudal societies in which the entire basis for social order was, in one sense, the inherent lack of equality and commonality between the governing and the governed. Moreover, I take Robert Cox to heart and concur that all ideologies are necessarily *for* someone and *for* some reason. And given that the advent of nationalism in the Balkans did not coincide with significant *social* transformations (although it saw the collapse of nominally foreign imperial regimes, these were replaced not by emancipatory republics, but by reconstituted monarchies and oligarchies largely governed by former pliant imperial clients) I have come to see it largely as a mechanism for preserving entrenched elites in power; that is, as fundamentally reactionary rather than transformative.

What mistakes have the US and EU committed in attempting to address the political challenges of the Western Balkans? How should they proceed moving forward?

One could write tomes about this question. The shortest answer, and the one that covers the most ground, is that since the 1990s both the U.S. and the EU have sought to appease rather than confront parasitic and authoritarian elites in the Western Balkans. That is most obvious with Washington and Brussels' contemporary policy toward the near autocratic regime in Serbia. However, it has been obvious for decades in the West's Bosnia policy too. The Dayton Peace Accords and the subsequent Dayton constitutional regime are, in essence, an elaborate and systemic exercise in appeasing the most extremist demands of the militant nationalists and re-organizing a society around their preferred political principles (i.e., ethnic sectarianism, segregation, and civic inequality). Even Richard Holbrooke came to regret allowing the continuation of the name *Republika Srpska* for the smaller of Bosnia's two entities. But virtually the entire Dayton regime was, largely, in the service of normalizing and realizing the wartime aims of

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Belgrade and, to a marginally lesser extent, Zagreb. Contemporary Bosnia, in turn, remains dysfunctional because that original mistake has never been redressed, and has, if anything, infected Western regional policy in its entirety. Note, for example, the fact that presently both American and EU officials appear far more critical of the government of Kosovo than of Aleksandar Vučić's Serbia – a borderline authoritarian state and a veritable Russian satellite state. Why? Because Kosovo insists a final agreement between the two sides that will be in line with the democratic principles of the broader Euro-Atlantic community, whereas Serbia is pursuing ethno-sectarian partition. And the latter remains the West's preferred model for dealing with the Western Balkans.

To what extent has the trend of democratic backsliding within the EU affected policy towards the Western Balkans?

The EU's policy towards the Western Balkans has gone from incompetent to malign. The fundamental reason for that transition is in the democratic backsliding within the EU itself, and the accompanying rise of hard-right nationalist politics within the respective member states. As a result, "neighborhood policy" is now, functionally, being set by countries like Hungary and Croatia. Budapest actively sponsors the secessionist activities of Milorad Dodik, and likewise champions the growing autocratic climate in Serbia, while Zagreb has been allowed to engineer a kind of quasi-colonial posture towards Bosnia. This has been aided and abetted both by the Commission and the Office of the High Representative. Then, of course, you have the absurd blockade of North Macedonia by Bulgaria, as well the comically irrelevant "shuttle diplomacy" of the EU's supposed Serbia-Kosovo envoy Miroslav Lajcak. And all of this, one must remember, is playing within the context of the collapse of the decades-long "enlargement project" in the Western Balkans and the years-long inability of Brussels or the member states to articulate a replacement strategy.

What do the recent Bosnian elections tell us about the constitutional arrangements set out in the Dayton Peace Agreement?

Both the elections themselves and the profoundly illiberal intervention of High Representative Christian Schmidt on election day itself are representative of a fundamentally broken system. Turnout is now at its lowest point since the end of the war, hovering around barely 50% and may actually be below that considering the country's notoriously inaccurate official statistics. Large segments of the country's leadership are under U.S. and UK sanctions but will continue in power despite this, and seemingly with American and British support. The actual process of government formation remains more akin to alchemy than democratic coalition building, a fact that has only been made worse by Schmidt's interventions. Finally, and above all, those interventions have deepened rather than redressed the profoundly discriminatory ethno-sectarian aspects of the country's electoral and constitutional order. Even if, as is expected, the Constitutional Court strikes down aspects of Schmidt's new law, it will likely be years before any kind of substantive change is implemented, which will only further deepen the sense of pervasive lawlessness in Bosnia, while also implicating the legitimacy of the Office of the High Representative in the same.

How credible do you find the threats by recently elected Milorad Dodik to unilaterally withdraw Republika Srpska from Bosnia's shared state institutions?

Milorad Dodik is a committed secessionist, there is no question about that. The fact that he occasionally forestalls or trades certain immediate secessionist-related political objectives for other kinds of political favors from the international community or Sarajevo should not obscure the cardinal direction of his politics. It is very common among segments of the Western diplomatic class to dismiss Dodik as an "opportunist," but this is the same rhetoric we heard about Milošević and Putin. Of course, there are elements of opportunism to their activities, but believe people when they tell you who they are; especially when they keep telling you the same for years and years. Dodik is an extremist, he is a radical nationalist, and he is a secessionist. If and when he feels that he can successfully realize the secession of the RS entity, he will attempt to do so. It is therefore of the utmost importance that he and his SNSD be kept as far away from the levers of state power as possible, that is out of state-level governments, or at least to be kept away from sensitive national security portfolios such as the Defense Ministry or the Security Ministry.

In *Hunger and Fury*, you argued that a genuine democratic transition was becoming more apparent through the work of grassroots social movements that confronted those promoting ethnic division. Are

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you still optimistic about the role civil society can play in the democratic development of the region?

In the long term, I am. Or rather, I am not “optimistic” per se; I just believe that genuine democratic transformation cannot occur without civil society activation and mobilization. Unfortunately, I also think the wave of democratic activism which I described in the book as having lasted from about 2012 to 2016 has concluded. Instead, the competing scenario I sketched out in the book –reconstituted authoritarian-nationalist rule aided by the region’s return to the status of geopolitical borderland— appears to have won out, for the moment. The prospects for renewed democratic agitation will depend on a complex array of factors, not least of which is whether the region can avoid any renewed sectarian violence. Because nothing does more to dampen democratic prospects than the use of force, especially intercommunal violence, which remains a distinct and disturbing possibility in several countries in the region.

Do you see a viable route to EU integration for the Western Balkan states, and if so, what does it involve?

Not at this juncture, no. Absent a major political transformation within the EU, and a wholly novel conception of the necessity and urgency of EU enlargement – and perhaps even the nature of the EU itself – I believe the region will continue to remain on the bloc’s periphery, which will only further deepen the sense of crisis and desperation within the respective polities of the Western Balkans, and may even result in some kind of inter or intra-state conflict, although likely not on the scale of what we saw in the 1990s. Given that the EU and the key capitals have struggled to mount an adequate response to the war in Ukraine – what hope can one have in their ability to address the now compounding challenges and policy failures which have shaped the existing Western Balkans? We will likely see continued micro-developments, of course, such as the recent granting of candidacy status to Bosnia, or the opening of new chapters with some of the existing candidate states, but enlargement, as such, is dead.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

You need to speak a foreign language to study international relations and certainly if you are more an area specialist than a scholar of international relations. It is simply unacceptable to study, say, Albania without at least having a reading comprehension of the Albanian language. I am not suggesting that you need to be fluent, but you need to be, at least, conversational. For scholars of international relations, area studies, or even foreign policy, monolingualism is a failing. In fact, it is far more important that you learn a foreign language than that you learn the ins-and-outs of game theory or any adjacent quantitative skills which remain so bizarrely predominate, especially in the American academy. Languages are how you actually access cultures and histories; how you can begin to appreciate how people understand themselves and their communities. No amount of statistical data or secondary sources can supplement for that.