

Comment: Winds of Change in the Balkans

Author: [Edward Joseph](#)

With the Croatian result, the New Year suddenly holds out hope for change throughout the region. But limits to the democratic opening remain, and the lessons from the earlier result in Macedonia may in their own way be more important.

For some in the Balkans, the champagne celebrations have continued well beyond the New Year. With the recent election results in Croatia, the prototypical Balkan "national movement/party" has finally suffered a major drubbing at the polls. Not even the most optimistic dared predict that the opposition would gain two-thirds of the seats in parliament - enough to overturn the provisions that kept Croatia an autocracy.

Opposition forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia have taken inspiration from the collapse Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). In Belgrade, the sagging anti-Milosevic coalition has finally come together on a new round of street protests, including this time Vuk Draskovic, to begin in the spring. In Bosnia, moderates on all sides have expressed hope that following the collapse of the HDZ, Bosnia's fifth post-Dayton elections this spring might finally bring fundamental change.

Yet while the breeze blowing in from Croatia may inject some fresh air, unfortunately the political landscapes in both countries seem shaped to withstand even a full-scale Balkan "bura." Autocracies are driven by autocrats and, unlike the late Croatian President Franjo Tudjman, Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic is very much alive.

Furthermore, in the euphoria over the prospect of democratic change in Croatia, the importance of Tudjman's death has been - buried. Although his popularity had slipped, Tudjman was still the towering, historical figure of the political scene. And had he survived - with his strong personal appeal and discipline over his party, and his control of media and security apparatus, the election results would certainly have been different. With Tudjman campaigning, the opposition still would have gained, but turnout might well have been lower, certainly leaving a new government short of the critical two-thirds parliamentary majority required for constitutional changes.

Milosevic's subjects, of course, do not revere him the way Croats did Tudjman. But his very stature nevertheless makes the opposition look puny and unserious. Indeed, the opposition still cannot agree on whether to demand Milosevic's resignation. The squabbling between opposition leaders Draskovic and Zoran Djindjic, their own mixed records in office, and the failure of the winter 1996-97 protests to bring real change, have left voters cynical and apathetic.

By contrast, the availability of a united and untainted opposition in Croatia did what it is supposed to do in an election - galvanize the desire to "throw the bums out". As Croatia's economy sank deeper into recession, corruption scandals like the Dubrovacka Banka affair turned into anger at the ruling elite. In Serbia, economic misery and reports of corruption among the ruling parties translate not into anger, but indifference. Indeed, it is entirely possible that opposition parties could even lose some key districts if Milosevic allows municipal elections.

A decade ago anti-communism, nationalism and religion - the products of Zagreb's long struggle with Belgrade - were the preoccupations that brought Tudjman's party to victory. This year voters discarded the HDZ canards about the opposition being the dupes for a "new Yugoslavia." New Prime Minister Ivica Racan and some of the very same leadership that then headed Croatia's Communist Party were returned to office. Stipe Mesic, a serious presidential candidate (and the last president of Yugoslavia), campaigns incessantly on Croatia's mistaken meddling in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

In Serbia, there seems to be far less appetite to repudiate the "Balkan ghosts" of elections past. Remorse over Serbian excesses in Kosovo (let alone Bosnia and Croatia), is largely over the results - not the policy. Moreover, with the impact of NATO bombing all too apparent, the charge of "Western lackey" stings even if it doesn't stick. Rather than a Mesic coming forward to challenge the popular conscience, it is the extremist Vojislav Seselj who stands to benefit as much as any other politician.

Meanwhile in Bosnia, Croats again turned out heavily to exercised their exceptional right to vote in Croatian elections - and once again, the HDZ machine was the overwhelming beneficiary. Some would see this as proof that only where ethnic groups are separated by borders will voters feel secure enough to turn to non-nationalist leaders. Having expelled its Serb minority and having gained full control of its borders, the argument goes, Croats can now "afford" to concentrate on issues of economy and democracy - while their brethren in Bosnia still cannot. Indeed, even within Croatia, it appears that, as in the elections of 1997, some of the most hard-line areas are those where mixed Serb-Croat populations used to live.

This doesn't mean that ethnic groups must be separated. But it does illustrate the magnitude of the problem in a heterogeneous Balkan country. National conflict leaves a residue that survives even when the confirmation of firm international borders, let alone cantonal or inter-ethnic boundaries. And it is within that residue that autocracy thrives. It was no accident that SFOR, the NATO-led forces in Bosnia, found evidence of criminal activity and intelligence links between Croats in Croatia proper and Croats in the hard-line western Bosnia area of Herzegovina. Bosniak and Serb abuses also persist, defying intensive efforts to build democratic institutions.

The real lesson of the Croatian elections is that dismantling these old ethnic-based power structures and building new democratic institutions requires democratic partners. It is Ivica Racan's Social Democratic Party, not SFOR, that is going to introduce oversight over the intelligence apparatus, reduce the powers of Tudjman's imperious presidency, and make state television independent.

Unfortunately, getting these partners elected continues to prove elusive. Like Tudjman, Alija Izetbegovic has risen above politics to become a man for the ages; until he steps down, there is unlikely to be a major political realignment among Bosniaks. The demise of Biljana Plavsic is still a warning to Republika Srpska politicians of the perils of straying too far from core national issues. And even with a new government in Zagreb, the Croat corpus - smallest of the three constituent peoples of Bosnia - may not stray from the security of acting as a single, homogenous polity. These dynamics are all reinforced by Bosnia's "Dayton constitution". Designed to provide ethnic security by giving each group representation, it has instead served to emphasise ethnic polarisation, as candidates compete for votes exclusively among their own groups.

The salutary effect of breaking ethnic-based politics was demonstrated in the other, largely overlooked Balkan election held recently, in Macedonia. Although dogged by irregularities and sporadic violence, the polling was remarkable for one reason: the ethnic Slav candidate, the Macedonian Boris Trajkovski, prevailed largely due to the support of ethnic Albanians.

That Albanians would zealously turn out for someone from another ethnic group (indeed from a party formerly considered extreme) stands in stunning contrast to Bosnia and to neighbouring Kosovo - where anything smacking of Slavic or Serb is completely anathema.

Unlike in Bosnia, presidential candidates in Macedonia must compete for all of the country's votes - not just those of one's own ethnic group. Further, while Bosnia's system is strictly proportional, Macedonia uses a hybrid of proportional and first-past-the-post electoral systems that make it difficult for any party to govern or win the presidency by appealing strictly to one's own ethnic group. To gain or stay in power, Slavic nationalists, like Trajkovski, must temper their rhetoric and their goals; in turn, Albanian nationalists, to gain a stake in government, must moderate theirs.

The Croatian result shows that a homogeneous Balkan country can move beyond nationalism and autocracy. But Macedonia demonstrates how nationalism can be managed, even sublimated, in a common framework. Riven with virtually all of the region's ills, Macedonia has nevertheless devised a system in which elected leaders, however imperfectly, work to reconcile competing ethnic demands. In this context, the gradual development of democratic and non-ethnic institutions is possible. If 2000 is to be a year of democratic progress in the Balkans, it will require not only inspiration from Zagreb, but instruction from Skopje as well.

Edward Joseph has worked for many years in the Balkans as a senior advisor to the UN, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and other organisations. All rights reserved.

Location: [Balkans](#)
[Macedonia](#)
[Albania](#)
[Serbia](#)

Focus: [Balkans: Regional Reporting & Sustainable Training](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/comment-winds-change-balkans>