

# **EUROSCEPTICISM AMONGST YOUTH IN SERBIA AND CROATIA AS AN EXTREME FORM OF STRATEGIC COALITION**

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## **ABSTRACT:**

After the disintegration of Socialistic Federative Republic Of Yugoslavia, newly formed nation-states constructed their nationalistic ideologies in reflection to the Western World. While Serbian national identity was formed in an opposition to the western discourse, Croatia based its nationalism on the continuity within its independent presence in Europe. Today, twenty years after the separation both countries went through transitional processes, mostly generating its legitimacy through EU integration. Nevertheless, at the moment when both Serbia and Croatia are almost inside EU, researches show that the majority of young people believe that joining the European Union would only worsen the economic situation in their country (44% in Croatia and 48% in Serbia). Post-socialistic/communist reforms were (politically) mainly justified by the consensus around the European future while the EU institutions were the major forces that have legitimized these reforms. Although generally very optimistic towards EU integrations, Euroscepticism emerged in both Serbia and Croatia especially inside youth groups. Main reason for this skeptical feeling is in majority produced by both the prolongation of the transitional situation and the European paternalistic relation to the Balkans.

On one hand, right-wing nationalists apprehend re-birth of Yugoslav multiculturalism that could potentially abolish national feeling, while on the other hand, anti-liberal leftists deny processes of European integration calling the negative affects of liberal capitalism in their argumentation.

To illustrate these mechanisms, we can take the examples of the anti-NATO demonstrations in Belgrade in 2011, the "Facebook demonstrations" that took place in Zagreb at the same year or the recurrent student protests against liberalization of the university system in all ex-Yugoslavian countries.

Both anti-liberal and nationalistic scepticism are united in a strategic coalition. This paper rethinks the politics of difference as an activist strategy and examines the forms of Euroscepticism currently existing in the ex-Yugoslavian countries amongst youth.

## **KEY WORDS:**

Euroscepticism, nationalism, transition, youth initiative, Bologna educational reform

## **Euroscepticism towards EU or towards Europeans values?**

To describe a certain sceptic or oppositional feelings towards Europe different terms have been used over the past years to describe it: *Euroscepticism*, *anti-Europeanism*, *Euro-phobia* etc. The most common term “Euroscepticism” appeared for the first time in the British newspaper *The Times*, in 1985, to describe more flexible sentiment than “euro-phobia” or “anti-Europeanism”. As French historian Christophe Le Dréau observed, it cannot be understood as the geometric opposition to what could be defined as “euro-optimism” and prefers to describe it as “movements of opposition to European Construction”(Dréau 2009).

Paul A. Taggart and Aleks Szczerbiak noticed that this hostility, or scepticism, could be manifested on various levels. In their 2002 study based on political parties, the authors split euroscepticism in two manifestations: on one hand, they observe “*hard-Euroscepticism*” and on the other “*soft-Euroscepticism*” (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2002). The “hard” form would be a formal opposition towards any idea or forms of European unification or federation, while the soft version would be an approval of the idea of European unification but in an opposition to some of its practical implementations. As Le Dréau notices, it would be hard to spot “*hard Euroscepticism*” in political parties in member countries, even in extreme ones, and for him, every form of Euroscepticism can be assimilated to “*soft-Euroscepticism*”.

While Euroscepticism inside the EU refers mostly on its institutional and bureaucratic system, Balkans states, that are still waiting to become legitimate members of the EU, challenge not only institutional order, but also European cultural sphere. As Catharina Sørensen says it is not really clear if Euroscepticism is just turned against European Union or Europe as a cultural sphere (Sørensen 2008). When we analyze Euroscepticism in the youth discourse in Serbia and Croatia we can say that Eurosceptic sentiment evolved from some kind of quest for alternatives, on one side youth groups are dedicated in re-contextualization of their imagined national roots, while on the other side the socialist past and Marxist ideas are re-defining in current social-political occasions.

Balkans states spent the beginning of the 2000s in transitional processes preparing for their EU status. Being quite enthusiastic at the beginning, a long period of transition, and still alive nationalistic ideologies re-invented an anti EU principle in the public opinion, introducing a “*hard-Euroscepticism*” to different political discourses. Nevertheless, apart of few radical political parties, there is a general left-right political consensus around EU future. While they are careful not to challenge the European alternative, the youth, often grouped around extreme organizations do not hesitate to question the system itself. The trigger for the re-birth of Euroscepticism can be seen in the current euro-crisis, Greece’s loss of financial sovereignty and the overall difficult financial situation. Not only those non-EU members are spreading Euroscepticism, but also the idea of unification is now questioned in the Union itself.

## **Nationalistic discourses of Serbia and Croatia and the continuity within Europe**

In order to understand Euroscepticism at the beginning of 2010s in Serbia and Croatia, it is crucial to understand the evolution of the national identities in post-Yugoslav terms. Socialistic Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (in further text The Federation) based citizen’s sentiment on the postulate of the “unity and brotherhood”. The federation had supposed to “overcome” the idea of the “national” or nation and to put a Yugoslav citizenship in front of a citizenship of a particular member-nation. Nevertheless, as Antony D. Smith notices, all the reasons that possibly caused the disintegration of Yugoslavia were (at the end) based on national ideas, denying supra-national institutions and “Yugoslavian sentiment” (Smith 2010, 229). There are 5 main groups of theories that have argued on the prerequisites of the fall the Federation (Soso and Choen 2008):

1. *Explanation focused on the longue dureé emphasizing “ancient hatreds”, a “clash of civilization” or the legacy of imperial rule in the Balkans*
2. *Explanation focused on the historical legacy of the nineteen-century South Slav national ideologies and the first Yugoslav state building experiment from 1918 to 1941.*
3. *Explanation focused on legacy of Yugoslavia’s socialist system, its constitutional development and federal structure, its ideological delegitimation, and its ideological failure*
4. *Explanation focused on period of Yugoslavia’s breakdown in the second half of the 1980s and the role of political and intercultural agency*
5. *Explanation focused on the impact of external factors*

Without any intention to argue whether any of above theories is more correct than the others, when speaking in terms of Serbia's and Croatia's nationalisms, a certain pattern can be found in every of them. Both nationalisms are constructed in the reflection to the continuity within Yugoslavian heritage.

In Serbia, Milosevic's regime had legitimized itself through nationalism and rupture with the past, while, at the same time, stayed in the continuity with The Federation through the name of the new state (Federal Republic Yugoslavia, consisted of Serbia and Montenegro) and institutions. As Stef Jansen noticed, Milosevic was one of the main characters responsible for disintegration of the Yugoslavian federation but on the same time he based his politics on Yugoslavian legitimacy. Far right nationalists accused Milosevic that he was a communist, while his democratic opponents argued against him as a nationalist, thus this situation created a limbo in which he had strengthen a different nationalistic discourses with integrative/hegemonic character (Jansen 2005,22). In contrast to Milosevic's ambiguous relation to Yugoslavia, Croatian nationalist discourse emphasized Yugoslavia and Balkan as a main threat to Croatian sovereignty.

By being part of Balkans, an incomplete Self, as Maria Todorova revolutionary defined the ever-ambiguous position of Balkan, or the Balkans otherness, the identity of Serbia and Croatia has always been constructed in the reflection to the Western Europe.

Milosevic's ideology was in a "love/hate" relationship with Europe; had been constantly trying to legitimize itself as a betrayed part of Europe. On the other hand, Europe was a legitimization of Croatian sovereignty. Serbian nationalistic ideology was vernacularized through the rebirth of the "countryside ideals" while Croatia did everything to remind their citizens on their European heritage, playing with national symbols and language as best seen on the example where the name of the cinema theatre in Central Zagreb was changed from "Balkan" to "Europe".

Religion was another important guideline present in both nationalistic discourses. Serbian Orthodox heritage always gravitated towards Russia, while Croatia was always turned to the "Catholic West". Arguing the self-image in The Federation based on the religion Schöpflin notices: "At the same time, the religious fault line between Latin and Orthodox lands was strictly adhered to: Croatia and Slovenia see themselves rightly as Central European, whilst the remainder of the country is not" (G. Schöpflin in Todorova 2009, 148)

## **The more we are close, the more we want far**

Regarding the relation within EU in the Balkans, there are three categories of countries: On the first place, there is Croatia which is about to enter EU, then, countries with the candidate status: Montenegro, Albania, FRYO Macedonia and Serbia, and, at the end, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo without a candidature because of their specific statuses.

During the last two years we can notice a significant rise in a Eurosceptic sentiment among citizens, mostly in Croatia. In searching for an answer, one of the solutions is offered by Jacques Rupnik who observes, "the popular support for EU accession is stronger where it is least advanced, in Albania and weakest where it is most advanced in Croatia" (Rupnik 2011). Serbia is somewhere in between, with an equal number of EU opponents and supporters. Even if Croatia voted in large majority (66, 27 %) for the EU accession during the last referendum, low rate of the participation, less than 50% (43, 67 %), indicates high level of EU scepticism. According to Survey Data of the European Fund for the Balkans revealed in march 2012, made for the project – *From Yugoslavia to the European Union: 20 Years After 1991 – The Tale of Two Generations*, made with young people born before the disintegration of the Yugoslavia in 1971 and after it in 1991, in Croatia more than 33% of people of the first observed generation (1971) are against the EU membership, while this number goes to 44% among the younger generation. In Serbia, the numbers are closer - for the 1971 born (47%) and the generation of 1991 (48%). This survey revealed another interesting information; the "Yugonostalgia" is coming back in Serbia where the majority thinks that life would have been better and easier if we had managed to save The Federation<sup>1</sup>.

Apart of above mentioned disappointment in a long period of transition, the reason for Euroscepticism can also be found in a paternal relation between EU and Balkans countries. Young Croatian philosophers and activists Srećko Horvat and Igor Štiks in their paper *Welcome to the Desert of Transition! Post-Socialism, the European Union, and a New Left in the Balkans* agitate the following idea: "according to its 1993 Copenhagen policy, it (EU) is supposed to educate, discipline, and punish while offering EU membership as the prize at the end of the bumpy road of Transition" (Horvat and Štiks

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<sup>1</sup> Source European Fund for the Balkans

<sup>2</sup> Source Eurostat

2011). Alluding to Foucault's principles (discipline and punish), the authors argue that EU puts itself in a position of a model and a reward at a same time.

"Bumpy road" of transition and its teleological concept is today seriously criticized. The concept of EU as a reward implies "pains" like unemployment and privatization of important social goods like health or education systems. These pains are leading to a promised end, which would come as a prize in the form of the EU membership. With the current changes inside the EU, mostly led by the economic collapse, the prize itself had lost its previous value; therefore the whole pain/reward process lost its credibility. As democracy expert Thomas Carothers says, transitional paradigm has lost its validity, as most countries that belong to this category are blocked in the "Grey Zone" (Carothers 2002), where they are hibernating and even if the reward comes (as it happens for Croatia today) the political and social situation remains unchanged.

Croatia is the second European country with the highest level of youth unemployment with almost 40% of young people (15-24) without job<sup>2</sup>. Another example of the low social standard can be found in Serbia, where more than 70% of young people (15-35)<sup>3</sup> still live with their parents, which is a consequence of a prolonged schooling, postpone marriage and the lack of job opportunities. With the establishment of the Bologna educational system and the upcoming privatization of the universities which generates very high tuition fees, students are facing the possible forced shutdown of their studies and thereby the impossibility to integrate in the labour market.

Boris Buden says that transitional paradigm implies the paternalistic position of the EU. He assumes the transformation of the eastern European communist political subject into an immature child who needs guidance from his experienced western parent (Buden, Children of Postcommunism 2010). Nevertheless, regarding the outcomes of the current Eurosceptic atmosphere in Croatia and Serbia, Buden's concept seems to be overcome. As his model crumbles, the "child" starts to question not just the commitment to the European club but also the very foundation of the construction of "the club" itself. Now that the "child" became a rebellious adolescent, it is not odd that the previously *a priori* taken EU (western) values are now questioned. "Adolescent" realized that was never actually asked for the opinion where it wanted to "transit" to.

What the "Adolescent" today faces is the situation where the EU countries are overwhelmed by the behaviour which has always been prohibited inside the Balkan countries; the behaviour that constructed the Balkans as Other: nationalism and far right parties in the EU parliament, rejection of multiculturalism, unequal distribution of human rights inside EU. Current situation inside EU rises an important question that is leading us the root of the problem of Euroscepticism: How to expect from the rebellious child to work so hard to achieve dreams that its mature parent have stopped believing in? Even if they reach the goal, if they become the EU members, Balkan youth is almost completely aware that they will share the destiny of their Greek compatriots.

## **Euroscepticism as an extreme form of strategic coalition in Croatia and Serbia**

While Croatia generally kept continuity with Europe all the way from 1991, different ideologies emerged in Serbia with different orientations and interpretations of Europe and European values. Milosevic's ideology had an ambiguous relation towards Europe, which is previously elaborated, and in opposition to it, Europe was postulated as the main democratic opponent. As Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia as a single-party state had never recognized the dichotomy of the legitimate left/right political paysage, the same system wasn't recognized in the 1990s Serbia neither, therefore, a paradoxical new dichotomy was created: one embodied in pro-European democratic movement and the other in the nationalistic ideology. Same situation can be implied on Croatia, because although its ideology was oriented towards Europe main political discourse was nationalism, which only found its legitimization in continuity with Europe and western Catholicism.

After the year 2000, EU was generally accepted in Serbian public opinion and the institutional transition had started. In this seems to be never-ending transition that at the same time introduced problems of corruption and globalization, once European agitators realized that inside the liberal democratic system, space for a left institutional critique doesn't exist. Also, in Croatia, every leftism was always related to Socialist Yugoslavia, and therefore discredited in public opinion. As Boris Buden notices leftist critique of globalization also implies a critique of loss of sovereignty produced by neo-liberal

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<sup>2</sup> Source Eurostat

<sup>3</sup> Source "Reviews on Youth Policies and Youth Work in the Countries of South Eastern Europe & Caucasus – Serbia" 2011

capitalism, which is a main right-critique argument (Buden, 2007). In this situation we're facing an inevitable coalition between two ideologies.

Having EU, the leader of transitional processes in both Croatia and Serbia, as an opponent, a new dichotomy is established. On one side, we have Eurosceptics (far left and right united) and on the other, pro-European neo-liberals. In this political situation, we are again witnessing the impossibility of establishing a Western-European legitimate left/right political paysage. This situation again reproduces the image of Balkans as a culturally "non European" part of Europe.

## **Bologna system of education as a paradigm of the EU institutional implementation**

Student protests that escalated on Croatian and Serbian universities in school year 2010/11 were the crucial moment when dissatisfaction among youth started to express. The Bologna educational reform, created to unify all European higher educational systems, was also applied in both Croatia, and Serbia, without a systematic reform and preparation of the old, socialist system based on free higher education. The Bologna system appears as a compendium of European reforms that play a direct role in the everyday lives of the youth. With this reform, once free system, with equal opportunities for every prospect student became a polygon for a reproduction of inequality.

As Srećko Horvat and Igor Štikš say, "in 2009 an independent student movement articulated a strong resistance to the privatization and commercialization of higher education. Their protest against neoliberal reforms in education turned into what was probably the first strong political opposition to not only the government, but the general political and social regime" (Horvat and Štikš 2011). Encouraged by the Croatian experience, in autumn 2011 Serbian students also blocked the Faculty of Philosophy (Humanities and social sciences) at the University of Belgrade. The blockade lasted for more than one month, requesting a free, public and fairly reformed university.

Student protests in both Croatia and Serbia embodied what can be called "new-left" movement that directly opposed painful social processes that lead to European Union. By protesting against the liberalization of the University, students tried to draw the attention on the global liberalization of the society. They organized the plenary assemblies in which they tried to explain their reasons for protesting, and to question the entire society. A great number of artists and intellectuals supported students in this attempt and joined in self-organized conferences, lectures, film projections, concerts and performances during the blockade. It is important to say that the protests weren't conducted by a single leader, but were based on some kind of participatory democracy. The protest demonstrated alternative type of political (self)organization by raising the voices that are otherwise mute in the representative democracy.

Protests on the University of Zagreb and another self-organized civic movement colloquially called "Facebook protests" opened a space for massive civic protests where citizens with different political opinions united to protest against the then HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union) government and their supporters, the EU. These protests were recognized as the "Croatian Spring" (without any implication of year 1991 and the secessions of Croatia from the Yugoslav federation), in reference to the "Arab Spring" that has happened at almost the same time. General civic dissatisfaction in Croatia managed to unite dissatisfied citizens with different problems, and different political ideologies. At the same time Croatian war veterans from 1990s Yugoslav civil war also protested, asking for their social rights referring directly to political program of HDZ. Although these two parallel protests never signed the same program or officially protested together, they anyhow fought for the same cause. Few representatives from those protesting groups were at the Croatian national television (HRT1) in the political show called Sunday at Two (Nedjeljom u dva) on Sunday, February 27th where they officially supported each-others fight.

In Serbia, protests didn't escalated farer than the university initiative. The difference between Croatian and Serbian activism can be found in the duration and progress of EU transition. Croatian citizens are facing the transitional consequences on a higher level and the understanding of the implications of the EU politics is more influential on their social dissatisfaction. Croatian protests stand in the direct opposition to the EU institutions and current reforms. On the other hand, Serbia is still far from EU accession, therefore civic action is still quiet and happens sporadically. Since Serbian citizens still don't face direct institutional implementation of the EU laws, the opponent in their Eurosceptic behaviour is an abstract concept of the EU values.

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