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THE OTHER EUROPE 20 YEARS LATER, AN INTERVIEW WITH JACQUES RUPNIK

Interview with Jacques Rupnik conducted by Igor Stiks and Gëzim Krasniqi

Stiks: *It is over 20 years since you published your acclaimed book ‘The other Europe’. You’re preparing a new book, which will cover the changes since the book first appeared. Can you give us an overview of these two decades of profound change across Eastern Europe? How do you see them now?*

Rupnik: Well, the first thing of course is that you have a great diversity of situations and different trajectories. It’s difficult to follow them all and one has to have a sort of comparative approach to it. At least you can say that there have been three main exit trajectories from socialism during those 20 years. You have the central European countries where more or less the conversion to the market, the democratic institutions and finally the whole accession into the EU was the main project. That transition there has mostly been presented as a success story. Then you have the case of the Balkans, where the war in the former Yugoslavia presented another kind of transition, from communism to nationalism, from federalism to building new nation states. This was a period when conflict, ethnic cleansing, minorities, peacemaking, peace building were the main characteristic which for a long period side-tracked the transition, democracy, institution building and the EU enlargement. So that was quite a different proposition from the one in Central Europe.

In the third case, which is the post Soviet area, there developed hybrid regimes, which were semi-authoritarian, even where you had democratic changes such as with the so-called coloured revolutions from Georgia to Ukraine. You had all these, but then you had setbacks as well. There you really had a different situation, partly because the domestic ingredients for democratisation were weaker and also because there was a big neighbour next door - Russia, whose influence on those developments whether in Georgia or Ukraine or Moldova was significant. Each time you had those enclaves - Transnistria in Moldova South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, even Eastern Ukraine which is populated by Russians etc-- Russia made those states politically unstable through the issue of minorities or through the border question. So the main conclusion after 20 years is that in order to have a democratic transition you need to have a consensus about the territorial framework of democracy. As long as you don’t have that, if you have contested borders and contested citizenship, that becomes the main driving political agenda and that’s of course more conducive to people who present themselves or political forces that present themselves as the defenders of the nation, the builders of the new state etc. Therefore you have to wait for the second phase which came after the decade of Yugoslavia’s dissolution, after Kosovo, when, first in Croatia but then gradually elsewhere, we saw a move from those kind of agendas towards internal democratisation, the rule of law, “Europeanisation”, etc. So if I look back, I would say these different trajectories were the main thing that underpins these two decades of political developments.

The irony is that even when you take those who supposedly did the best, the Central European success stories of democratisation, and look at the state of their democracy, you can see a decline in political participation in elections, populist setbacks as in Poland under the Kaczynski twins or a regression of constitutionalism and freedom of the press as in Hungary under Orban. So, basically you discover that 20 years after we see already a tired democracy. A democracy that is there, as the institutions, but which is fundamentally hollow.

Stiks: What would you say are the principal causes of this situation?

Rupnik: Sometimes the cause is the shallowness of the foundations of the new democracies and a merely formal acceptance of the rule and constraints. Sometimes, and this is more the argument I'm coming close to now, is that after '89 there was such a triumph of democracy, with the end of communism, that some even called it the end of history. The problem is that democracy had no rivals, so people imitated the democratic model that was available, but didn't know that the model they were imitating was itself in crisis. They imitated a model that was in crisis and therefore reproduced the symptoms of the crisis that exists in Western Europe. This is very much what we have seen, that they have entered the phase of democratic transition at a time when Western democracies were already in a state of crisis. East Europeans, full of enthusiasm, thought that they must not waste time and must not look for alternative models.

In retrospect, I think perhaps the main failing or mistake is that the legacies of dissent and civil society self-organisation were promptly discarded. They preferred the heroic narrative that, so the story goes, courageous people led by dissident intellectuals defeated the totalitarian regime. They forgot the more important legacy of dissent, which was the primacy of ethics in politics or engagement in politics with ethical concerns. The idea of civil society, that was the other important legacy of dissent, was that any democratic endeavour had a meaning, not because you want to conquer state power but because you want to build a civil society. These kinds of important dissident legacies have been discarded, partly because the dissidents themselves have been discarded. They didn't last long. The fact that a figure like Havel remained President, this was a symbol of something that was no longer there. The result is that you look at these tired, hollow democracies and they suffer from all the symptoms you find in Western democracies, but the situation is often worse because the institutional foundations are weaker, more fragile, and lack a firm social foundation. The new social classes that are the underpinning of a democratic system developed in the West over decades or centuries were not there. Hence the populist backlash that followed, as we have seen in Poland with the Kaczynski twins, in Slovakia, or in Hungary today. Even the most successful countries have reproduced some of the less likeable features of Western democracies without some of the other good features that exist. For example, in the American democracy you have a fantastically strong sense of civil society, you have counterweights, you have checks and balances, you have the independence of the judiciary, you have independent media etc. Then you look at a country like Hungary that is very weak, because when somebody like Viktor Orban comes in and starts dismantling one by one some of the main features of what was built in the last 20 years, you find little resistance. There was some civic resistance in Hungary, some mobilisation, but it would not have been successful on its own. It was successful because it got support from the European Union. Suddenly, EU Commissioners started sending letters to Orban, there was pressure from Western media, and they had to change the law, they had to adapt etc. So, sometimes these defects can be corrected by simultaneous mobilisation from the inside and European pressure from outside.

Stiks: You have been advocating European unification for quite a long time and here we are 20 years later, with most of the continent united but Eastern Europe in a rather second-class wagon, and Romanians and Bulgarians feeling like they are in third-class. The Western Balkans are still not integrated into the EU. Are you disappointed with the pace and effects of European integration?

Rupnik: I'm disappointed with the pace for sure. And mainly worried about the recently diminishing political will to extend the process further. After 1989, when the whole question

of enlargement came on the agenda in the first place, nobody was questioning it on principle. Some had reservations but there was little space to express them openly. For me, the integration process was much too long because there was a delay between 1989 and the EU accession in 2004. So, if '89 equals democracy plus the "return to Europe", you have the connection of the two. This was very strong. If you have this long a delay, 15 years between changing to a democratic system and EU accession, most people, most citizens will say, we've achieved democracy and Europe is a good thing, but the two things are separate from each other. So that would be my main criticism for why the timing matters. For the Balkans there was a different kind of motivation for engagement. The motivation was not because communism had fallen and democracy will bloom, no. It was because there was war, there was ethnic cleansing going on, and this was unacceptable. This is the argument that people like myself defended. It is unacceptable for Europe to see this on its periphery, in its immediate neighbourhood. Basically, how can you put trust in the building of Europe, in Maastricht without borders while Sarajevo is under siege and being bombarded, and we cannot stop it. So the European engagement in the Balkan was to stop ethnic cleansing in the name of European values. I'm not saying the engagement then was well thought out and brilliantly executed, but basically that was the motivation, you had to stop what was going on and the whole 1990s were related to that course of engagement. If you take the situation now, 20 years after 1989 and more than ten years after the war in Kosovo, when you talk about new engagement in the Balkans, well, there is no longer a connection to 1989, that's long gone. Secondly, there's not even the connection to what I just eluded to in the 1990s, that other engagement which was very important. There are a series of these states in the making and the EU is attending to it, but it has many other things on its plate that are basically holding it back from a much more forceful engagement.

Krasniqi: Are those related to EU's internal issues?

Rupnik: Mostly yes. The internal problems of the EU are something often ignored in the Balkans but, you know, right now there is a crisis within the EU. The EU is today deeply divided, but this is not a divide between East and West, this is a divide between North and South. You have actually some of the new members of the EU from the East saying "We are in the North". The Polish foreign minister came to Harvard in February and said, "This not an East-West split. This is a North-South split and we are part of the North. We are part of responsible people who know how to manage their budget. If there are people like the Greeks and others who are lying and who are cheaters etc. well, they must face the consequences". So, there is the very core of the EU, Europe, France, and Germany, they are the ones who invented Europe, they are the ones who make it work politically. And France is crucial there because it's the bridge between the North and the South and its capacity to engage Germany that holds the euro and Europe together. It is now under great duress. The question is: under these circumstances inside the EU how do you expand, how do you make the great bold move to open the EU towards very difficult areas with the uncertainty that this brings? You need the political will and you need an element of generosity, including financial generosity and right now all that will and all that generosity is concentrated into preserving the core. How do you expand to the periphery if the core is in doubt? This is very difficult and it is not always understood in the Balkans.

Stiks: What about the developments in the Middle East? How do they affect EU's engagement in the Balkans?

Rupnik: If you ask any European leader "What is the most important challenge the EU will face now?" they'll say a democratic revolution in the Arab world. From Tunisia to Egypt,

from Algeria to Syria, it's all in a shambles and this is our new backyard. This is a major thing because it concerns security, it concerns migration policy, it concerns economics, it concerns democracy. Suddenly the danger for the Balkans would be to be neglected because of the internal crisis of the EU that I just mentioned and because of the new external challenges. I hope this won't happen. I'm just trying to say it's possible. Clearly we have to make sure that the Balkan question doesn't drift from the European agenda. That will depend a lot actually on the Balkans themselves. I would say this is a two-way thing. Maybe the Europeans are not doing as much as necessary but when you look at what's going on in the Balkans, you have to start with the Greeks. One of the side effects of the Greek crisis is the enormous disservice it's doing to the rest of the region.

What is the conclusion then? You discover even for a country that has not been communist, that has been for 30 years in the EU, it doesn't have state capacity, or well-functioning institutions. It doesn't have a functioning tax collecting system and has been lying about its finances. So, there is no trust. Nobody thinks seriously today that there is any real conflict that is likely to start in the Balkans, but they think that bringing these guys in the EU carries problems because of the rule of law, functioning state institution, trustworthiness etc. The Greek crisis is doing a terrible disservice to everybody else, and Romania and Bulgaria, who are the latest to have joined, have not performed well either. So the widespread opinion is that Romania's and Bulgaria's accession was premature and the whole Greek issue is now complicating things even more.

Stiks: What in your opinion should be done in this area?

Rupnik: I have been arguing for a regional approach to EU enlargement in the Balkans for a very long time, since the war, and I'm still on this line. I know this is not popular in Brussels and in the region and nobody likes it. I am for a regional approach to the Western Balkans for one main reason, which has to do with what Veton Surroi calls the unfinished states. Kosovo is unrecognised, Bosnia without a functioning constitution, Serbia doesn't know where its borders are, Macedonia doesn't know what its name is or what it's supposed to be... They are unfinished in different ways and these unfinished states are connected. Serbia is connected to Republika Srpska and Kosovo and Montenegro etc. So, I know it's unpopular, I know that the official line is the country by country regatta principle that judges countries by their individual merits. I know all that, but we have to invent a special, different approach for enlargement to the Balkans and that must be a regional approach since this is, in my opinion, the best way to address the specific predicament of the region and move from protectorate to integration.

Krasniqi: It has been argued that people of the former communist block gained more political and civic rights but they lost a lot of social rights that they had in socialism. Does this lack of social dimension make the post-communist countries weak democracies?

Rupnik: It is true that you gain new political rights and civic rights at the expense of social rights. Of course, the communists have judged that the social rights are essential and the other sets of rights are formal and thus could be dispensed with. After 1989 we have had the reverse process and what we discovered of course is something we know from Western Europe. West European democracies have developed the welfare state, especially after World War II as part of building democratic legitimacy, that's part of what citizens expected after the economic crisis of the 1930's and the war. Yes, you have the right to vote every four years for your government, but you have also the social entitlements. This is how you include people into the system and one reason why it was done after the war was to prevent a return

to the fascist 1930s and also to diffuse the temptation of going towards the communist model. It was an alternative model but the model that builds citizenship with that welfare state that I mentioned. What we have seen the last 30 years is the domination of liberal economics (privatisation, deregulation and selfishness turned into the ideology of the post-1989 era which the late Tony Judt remarkably analysed in his last book "Ill Fares the Land"). Especially after 1989, there was no longer any counterweight. In Central Europe you could say that the growth, the economic growth has been sufficient for some degree to appear and therefore there is a substantial part of the population that is better off, and that's what supports it. I'm not saying everybody, of course there are winners and losers, but on the whole this is sustainable because on the whole a greater number of people is better off. This is not the case in the Balkans.

Stiks: The former Yugoslav citizens were certainly better off in 1989 than most citizens of Central and Eastern European states. Very soon after that you have wars and instability in the 1990s.

Rupnik: War is a major cause. Milica Uvalic explains in her new book, what happened in the 1990s was war and all the parasitic, corrupt, criminal system that is associated with it. Then you move into the transition, the post-Milosevic transition and, as it turns out, there was only one choice. How come only one idea imposed itself? This is so partially because of the international pressure to do it that way. You have to quickly privatise, you have to deregulate etc. After the fall of Milosevic people thought they have the possibility to be freer. Until then there was little or no possibility of travel, so you were trapped, your standard of living was going down. Finally, they say "now be glad because you are building democracy". Well, they were doing that but the process was not totally democratic. I think that for the European project to be palatable, to be acceptable to the people in the Balkans you will have to really rethink and reconnect with democratic achievement and alternative ways of thinking about the economy. In fact, the impact of international economic crisis two years ago had a sobering effect. Just like with democracy, they had a democratic model they imitated and then they discovered the model is in crisis. Similarly, they embarked on the market model, they followed it, they imitated it, and then 20 years later they discover that Wall Street has collapsed and that the model is not quite a model. A similar sobering effect on the economic front would be a good idea for the Balkans, if they have something to learn from the central European experience. They are the new members of the EU, they are doing well but the democracies are tired and are hollowing from inside and their economic system has now reached its limit because they are part of a more general system that is in crisis. So maybe this might be an occasion for the Balkans to learn from the transition, to make a much bigger effort than was ever done in central Europe on the fight against corruption and the whole kleptocracy that went hand in hand with privatisation. This is also the time to rethink the approach to enlargement for the Balkans. We're not going to cherry pick and select one by one. They should all get candidate status now and open accession negotiations. That does not guarantee, of course, when you conclude them but sends a strong signal and shifts the burden of responsibility to the political elites in the region. They will have to come in together because of their inter-related problems and because that was the pattern during all the previous enlargements which always entailed a group of countries. No other enlargement is on the table for a foreseeable future and the next one should be enlargement to the Balkans.