



Latest Tweet

Please wait while our tweets load.

[If you can't wait - check out what we've been twittering.](#)



[+](#) Share | [f](#) [my](#) [g](#) [t](#)

[Publications](#)

[Policy Pamphlets & Reports](#)

[Strategic Briefings](#)

[Backgrounders](#)

[Letters](#)

[Conversations](#)

[Editorials](#)

[Policy & Research Areas](#)

[Regions](#)

[Britain](#)

[Greater Europe & Eurasia](#)

[European Union](#)

[European Neighbourhood](#)

[Russia & Eurasia](#)

[The Americas](#)

[North America](#)

[Latin America](#)

[Middle East & Africa](#)

[Middle East](#)

[Africa](#)

[Asia Pacific](#)

[East Asia](#)

[South Asia](#)

[South East Asia & Australia](#)

[Themes](#)

[Democracy & Development](#)

[Environment & Economy](#)

[Global Security & Terrorism](#)

[Transatlantic Relations & Defence](#)

[Events](#)

[Future Events](#)

- [Past Events](#)
- [Campaigns & Projects](#)
- [Affiliated Projects](#)
- [Worldview](#)
- [Global Power Europe](#)
- [YPFP London](#)
- [Greater Surbiton](#)
- [APPG](#)
- [Media Centre](#)
- [Online Shop](#)
- [Recommended Reading](#)

Email List

Sign up here and keep up to date by joining the HJS mailing list

Email

[Sign up](#)

[HOME](#) > [Policy & Research Areas](#) > [Regions](#) > [Greater Europe & Eurasia](#) > [European Neighbourhood](#)

Popular protest in South East Europe bolsters the democratic world

By Marko Attila Hoare, 28th January 2009

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Popular protests, fired by social grievances, helped to topple the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe and replace them with democracies. Popular protests today can help to make better democracies out of the states of South East Europe.

2. States that are less than perfect as democracies will be less than perfect members of the Western alliance, as the examples of Turkey and Greece show. It is in our interest to encourage the reform of such states to make them more stable pillars of the democratic world, so any

popular protest or democratic agitation that assists this process should be welcomed.

3. Russia's halting of gas supplies to the Balkan countries has greatly damaged its standing among ordinary people in the region. We must not make mistakes of this kind, but must show respect and consideration to the ordinary citizens of existing and aspiring EU and NATO members.

Idealism is the new realism, it has been said. Nowhere has the adage proved more pertinent than in South East Europe, where socially fired popular protests against despotic regimes have consistently worked to strengthen the position of the Western alliance and the democratic world generally. It was, of course, thanks to the great wave of democratic revolutions in 1989, culminating in the overthrow of Nicolae Ceausescu, that the two East Balkan countries of Romania and Bulgaria - not so long ago bastions of the worst kind of Communist tyranny - are today members of NATO and the EU. Serbia's turn toward the West began with the revolution of October 2000 that overthrew Slobodan Milosevic; though this turning point turned out to be less sharp than was first imagined, Serbia's evolution into a democratic state with credible ambitions to EU membership has been steady, if not exactly smooth, since then. Georgia and Ukraine, too, turned westward with the Rose and Orange Revolutions of 2003 and 2004.

Some might be inclined to view this through Cold War lenses, and to say that such upheavals are to be desired when directed against hostile regimes, but less so when directed against those that are our allies. Yet this would be to fail to grasp the political realities of the late 2000s. For there is a very good case to be made that states today that are less than democratic are necessarily less than perfect as allies, and that being subject to democratic change can only improve them in this regard. This is because authoritarian regimes tend inevitably to present pressure for democratic change in occidental, nativist terms, as part of an alien, Western imperialist, possibly Jewish assault on the nation. And rhetoric of this kind inevitably serves to undermine any alliance we may have with them, even if purely geopolitical factors should work in

favour of such an alliance. Conversely, genuine democrats in non-democratic or democratising states will usually look to the US and EU as beacons of light.

This may be demonstrated by a look at the southern flank of South East Europe - Turkey and Greece. Both countries have been committed members of NATO for many years, but anti-democratic tendencies in both have rendered them less than model allies. Turkey's brutal suppression of its Kurdish population, and the resulting war between the Turkish security forces and Kurdish PKK rebels, has persistently [spilled over](#) into northern Iraq, further undermining stability in that already barely stable country. Turkey is a strategically crucial member of the Western alliance, yet its human rights abuses, its restrictions on free speech and its military's interference in politics have helped to keep it out of the EU. Turkey's gradual democratisation in recent years, under the guidance of the moderately Islamic, pro-EU Justice and Development Party (AKP), has ironically, according to [some sources](#), led extremist elements from the ranks of the secular Turks to begin closing ranks with the Turkish Islamists on an anti-democratic, anti-Western basis. It is the democratising elements that look westward, while their opponents seek to defend the nation and/or faith from corrupting Western influences.

As for Greece, though its restrictions on democracy and human rights abuses are not on the scale of Turkey's, as an ally of the West it scores much lower than its eastern neighbour - precisely because it is not a mature democracy. Greece's [disgraceful role](#) in regional politics; its past support for the Milosevic regime; its undermining of the fragile states of Macedonia and Kosova - all are the result in large part of a Greek ultranationalism that also hates the West as the mortal enemy of the Orthodox East, as Greek journalist Takis Michas has [brilliantly described](#). Greece is, furthermore, among the [most anti-Semitic](#) countries in Europe, something that the Greek media's reaction to the Gaza conflict has [only confirmed](#).

Both Greece and Turkey are, however, countries whose internal politics are very much in states of flux. Greece has in recent weeks been the scene of a

huge explosion of social anger on the part of youth and workers, directed against the very government of Costas Karamanlis that has been proving such a menace to regional stability. The protests have included riots, vandalism and assaults on police officers, something that can only be condemned without reservation. But the violent element cannot obscure the large numbers of Greeks who have been protesting and striking peacefully. Although the protests have now passed their peak, the social struggle in Greece is not over; Greek farmers are [currently](#) blockading roads and border crossings in Greece in protest at the low prices of farm produce. It would be a mistake to see these protests purely in social terms; as was the case with the Romanian revolution of 1989 and the Serbian revolution of 2000, the Greek protests, fired as they are by social grievances, may have positive political effects. There is every reason to hope that these protests will hasten the end of the Karamanlis regime and contribute to a political rejuvenation of Greek politics, resulting in a country more at peace with itself and with its neighbours.

There was a time, perhaps still not completely past, when radical socialists would see in every wave of social protest the harbinger of the overthrow of capitalism, and many members of the conservative right would fear such protest for the same reason. Yet saner heads today know this is false: ordinary people are fundamentally conservative with a small 'c'. They do not want the overthrow of capitalism, or revolution for revolution's sake, but engage in social protest defensively, when the system seems to be letting them down. What they want is stability, prosperity and the pursuit of happiness - things that liberal democracy is better able to offer than any other political system. For all the Cassandras' talk of how recognising Kosova's independence in February 2008 would drive the Serbian people into the arms of the extreme nationalists, most Serbian people are fundamentally less interested in Kosova than they are in feeding themselves and their families - as was [proved](#) when pro-European elements won the Serbian parliamentary elections that followed soon after international recognition of Kosova's independence. Bread and butter issues will, in the last resort, trump nationalist pipe-dreams; Turkish Cypriots abandoned the unrealisable goal of an independent Turkish Cypriot state when in 2004 they voted

overwhelmingly in favour of Cyprus's reunification on the basis of the Annan Plan, because they wanted to enjoy the benefits of EU membership. Greek students who had a better chance of finding decent jobs and pursuing more promising careers after graduating would be less likely to go out on to the streets to fight the police. Thus, the ordinary people of the Balkans, like the rest of us, have an interest in the spread of stable, post-nationalist liberal democracy.

Quieter, but perhaps ultimately more significant than the social explosion in Greece, is the movement to apologise for the Armenian genocide currently under way in Turkey; more than 28,000 Turkish citizens to date have signed a [petition](#) drafted by a group of Turkish intellectuals apologising for what happened to the Armenians in 1915. Turkish state prosecutors have [announced](#) they will not take action against the organisers of the petition. This campaign, the work of entirely mainstream Turkish academics, journalists and others, marks a tremendous step forward for Turkish democracy; a step toward a Turkey that will, it is to be hoped, enjoy normal relations with neighbours like Armenia, Cyprus and Iraq, and whose commitment to, and sharing of the values of, the Western democratic bloc will be unquestioned. Yet this process of democratisation depends entirely on the initiatives of brave individuals, such as the organisers of the apology petition.

No southeast European nation is a stauncher friend of the West than Kosova. Here, a particularly active [protest movent](#) exists, directed against the international administration of the country but catalysed by social discontent, and spearheaded by [Vetevendosje](#). Given the dismal record and [stupendous corruption](#) of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and the pusillanimity of the EU in resisting Serbian efforts to destabilise Kosova, the frustration and anger that have spawned this movement can only be described as entirely legitimate and justified. The people of Kosova are as deserving of full democracy as any other nation, and full democracy requires full international independence. If we allow the international administration of Kosova to drag on indefinitely, without any meaningful progress on the reintegration of the Serb-controlled areas, we shall only have ourselves to

blame for any future popular explosions in Kosova in which the international administration finds itself on the receiving end.

We can, at the very least, learn something from the Russians about how not to treat one's allies. After the Russians cut gas supplies to the Balkans in the course of their dispute with Ukraine, citizens of Russia's supposed 'ally' Serbia, in the industrial city of Kragujevac, [burned a Russian flag](#) earlier this month in protest at being left without heat during the winter. And as one elderly Belgrade resident was [quoted](#) as saying, 'Russians always gave us nothing but misery. They should never be trusted, as this gas blackmail of Europe shows'. Resentment of Russia is not limited to Serbia, but has [spread across](#) eastern Europe. In the [words](#) of one elderly citizen of Bulgaria, another country frequently described as traditionally pro-Russian: 'This is a war without weapons in which Russia has used its control of energy supply to flex its muscles in front of the world... I am cold and angry. We have always been dependent on Russia, and this crisis shows that the situation hasn't changed. Instead of bombs or missiles, they want us to freeze to death.' In the Bulgarian port of Varna, residents [demonstrated](#) in front of the Russian consulate, holding banners that read 'Stop Putin's gas war'. Moscow's mistake has been to wage its gas war indiscriminately, without taking into account the effect this would have on South East Europeans upon whose goodwill its geopolitical ambitions ultimately depend.

The biggest advantage that the democratic world has over its enemies is that its governments govern with the consent of the people. We must never forget this, as we strive to deal with the difficult set of problems facing us in South East Europe.

Marko Attila Hoare is European Neighbourhood Section Director of the Henry Jackson Society

© 2013 The Henry Jackson Society, Project for Democratic Geopolitics. All rights reserved.

[Web Design](#) by Byte Art