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# ***Lost Decade in the Balkans***

## **Turmoil Is Born of Rage in the 'European Losers' Club'**

By Lee Hockstader  
*Washington Post Service*

BELGRADE — To the jarring accompaniment of kazoos and car horns — and, occasionally, tear gas and truncheons — popular discontent in the Balkans has spilled noisily into the streets this winter, toppling one government, badly shaking two others and erupting into violent spasms in all three.

The triggers of the current turmoil vary from an economic meltdown in Bulgaria to the spectacular failure of get-rich-quick schemes in Albania, to brutish attempts by Serbia's rulers to steal local elections and cling to power, whatever the cost.

But the rising resentment in the Balkans has some common roots. Not least is the strong sense throughout the region — on thronged streets, among intellectuals and in diplomatic circles — that by refusing or delaying basic democratic or economic reforms, governments have cheated their people and left them out of an otherwise prosperous and advancing continent.

Increasingly, the 1990s are beginning to look like the Balkans' great lost decade, and the

hundreds of thousands of people who have taken to the streets of dozens of cities and towns are furious at being left in Europe's dust.

"We all feel like we belong to the European losers' club," said Predrag Simic, director of the Institute of International Politics and Economics in Belgrade. "We're just way behind the rest of the continent, including Central Europe."

What is particularly galling to many is the realization that the neighbors to the north — Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland — are comparative models of democratic harmony and free-market prosperity.

Television has shown them that, and it dazzles them with other tantalizing snippets of the good life. Even in Tirana, for decades one of the world's most isolated capitals, a flowering of satellite dishes testifies to a subversive familiarity with sitcoms and films from Italy, Albania's neighbor across the Adriatic Sea.

"People watch American movies; they know what a decent life is," said Slobodan Vukсанovic, an opposition lawmaker in Serbia. "And now, after the freedom of the demon-

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## BALKANS: The 'European Losers' Club'

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strations, they know they can achieve something with their own hands, whistles and feet."

But despite the achievements of street protests in Bulgaria, where the government fell Feb. 4, and Serbia, where it made major concessions to the opposition the same day, the region's traditions and history will make its renewal slow going, analysts say.

Most of Serbia, and all of Bulgaria and Albania, were under Turkish rule for centuries, isolating them from the rest of Europe and leaving a culturally mixed society where intolerance flourishes.

Economically, too, history has left its mark on the Balkans with a structure of centralized control that is rigid even by Eastern Europe's standards.

"The Balkans have different economic histories and traditions — including very strong involvement of the state in the economy even before the Communists came along — and in the Communist period this difference was preserved," said Roumen Avramov, an economic historian at the Center for Liberal Strategies in Sofia. "Until 1989, nobody here learned Western economics. This was a big difference

compared with Poland and Hungary."

Indeed, throughout the Balkans there is enormous skepticism that a change in government would necessarily usher in a new era of tranquillity and wealth.

"Everybody here has been partly responsible," said Nikolai Kamov, a respected Bulgarian lawmaker who resigned this month from the governing Socialist Party. "We've all had our chance since 1990 — an unexpected chance — and we all proved we were unprepared for reforms."

Taken together, it makes for an explosive mix of social discontent.

The Serbian opposition, after nearly three months of daily marches, has forced the government of President Slobodan Milosevic to bow to its central demand: that its victories in Belgrade and 13 other cities in the November elections be recognized. But the experience of stolen elections, as well as mounting doubts that Mr. Milosevic will respect the constitution and leave office when his second term ends this fall, underscores the stagnation in Belgrade.

"Something natural in all other countries — that you can change political power by the vote — is still being fought here," said Novak Pribicevic, a retired ambassador.



### Balkan Malcontents

Population in millions and gross domestic product in U.S. dollars.

|          | Population | GDP per capita |
|----------|------------|----------------|
| Serbia   | 10.5       | \$1,500        |
| Bulgaria | 8.6        | \$3,830        |
| Albania  | 3.4        | \$1,100        |

Source: European Bank for Reconstruction and Development

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"This has been about democracy and freedom," said Mr. Simic, the analyst in Belgrade. "In three months, though, there will be workers on the streets, too."

In Albania, the protests' mutation began last month in shock and anger at an economic cataclysm — the crash of huge pyramid schemes — that has robbed perhaps a third of the country's population of its life savings. But demonstrators quickly began venting their outrage at the government in broader terms, for retaining some of the more odious features of the country's Stalinist past.

By contrast, Bulgaria has racked up a solid record of democratic reform. It has

held seven fair elections in seven years, changed governments more or less smoothly and opened the media to opposing views.

But the Socialist Party — former Communists — has held or controlled power for five of the last seven years and balked at even the most modest economic reforms. The resulting financial catastrophe finally infuriated a previously quiescent people, who took to the streets, protesting daily for a month to demand the government's resignation. On Feb. 4, the Socialists finally gave up power, yielding to a caretaker government until elections in April.