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WORKING PAPER

Felipe Hernández

**Inequalities, Economies
of Fear and Geopolitical
Turmoil. Southeastern
Europe and Central
America Beyond Borders**

re:constitution - Exchange and Analysis on Democracy and the Rule of Law in Europe
c/o Forum Transregionale Studien e. V., Wallotstr. 14, 14193 Berlin

Felipe Hernández

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Working Papers, Forum Transregionale Studien 21/2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25360/01-2023-00031>

Design: Plural | Severin Wucher

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The Forum Transregionale Studien is an institutional platform for the international cooperation between scholars of different expertise and perspectives on global issues. It is funded by the Berlin Senate Department for Higher Education and Research, Health, Long-term Care and Gender Equality.

Working Papers are available in open access via *perspectivia.net*, the publication platform of the Max Weber Stiftung.

re:constitution - Exchange and Analysis on Democracy and the Rule of Law in Europe is a joint programme of the Forum Transregionale Studien and Democracy Reporting International, funded by Stiftung Mercator.

Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War, world politics has been dominated by a "coherent set of convictions" aiming to demonstrate that the globalization of capital would lead to the consolidation of more stable and rational societies. This was accompanied by a narrative based on the belief that if the "less developed" countries applied the economic "recipes" of this globalization, privatizing state enterprises, deregulating markets, reducing public spending, they would balance fiscal accounts, make employment more flexible and become rich investment grounds. Central America and Southeast Europe, in particular non-EU countries, are two examples, among many others, of regions where financial globalization was established as a starting point for the construction of new states, new social ties and future democracies. However, all the hopes placed in this socio-economic model were quickly dashed with the emergence of a new global disorder that erupted with the 2008 financial crisis. Uncertainty submerged citizens, political authoritarianism was revitalized and the strengthening of the rule of law receded.

Keywords: Global politics, austerity, alterity, margins, authoritarian populism

Suggested Citation:

Felipe Hernández, "Inequalities, Economies of Fear and Geopolitical Turmoil. Southeastern Europe and Central America Beyond Borders", re:constitution Working Paper, Forum Transregionale Studien 21/2023, available at <https://reconstitution.eu/working-papers.html>

Inequalities, Economies of Fear and Geopolitical Turmoil. Southeastern Europe and Central America Beyond Borders

Felipe Hernández¹

« Chaque partie du monde reflète l’histoire du monde entier, la subit, s’en accommode. »

Fernand BRAUDEL, *Au Brésil...*, *Annales*, 1948, p. 102.

Introduction

A priori, everything separates Central America and Southeastern Europe, just to begin with the size of the Atlantic Ocean. But the multiple forms of exploitation of territories and bodies, the revitalization and adaptability of political authoritarianism, the reproduction of inequality through domestic and international practices, turning them into "second and third category zones", have brought them into consonance. Increasingly, citizens are opposing in more radical ways a social world that is becoming more and more extreme in its treatment of individuals, where institutional violence, injustices, its violence and the frustration of living in a late modernity seem to determine the future. Complex regions where the language of discontent and disaffection have become "spaces of breathing" against an order where inequality is the law. Conflicts inherited from the Cold War are now fed by the strength of social inequalities, "messianic populism" and the instability of the world economy.

This article explores the socio-political costs of global destabilization in countries where democracy is a contested terrain between opposing actors and where the rule of law is a reality experienced by a minority. Nowadays, these two regions allow us to follow the shadow zones of democracy where a large part of their inhabitants live a life on the margins of the *globalization of capital*.

1. Inequalities and Fantasized Spaces

According to the latest IDEA report, "half of the world's democratic governments are in decline, undermined by problems ranging from restrictions on freedom of expression to distrust in the legitimacy of elections"². This situation tells us a reality: the current world

¹ Dr. Felipe Hernandez is a 2020-2021 re:constitution Fellow and academic visitor at the University of Oxford (OSGA-LAC). E-mail: hernandezg.felipe@gmail.com.

² IDEA, "The Global Democracy Weakens in 2022", published: <https://www.idea.int/news-media/news/global-democracy-weakens-2022>. (accessed 30.11.2022).

political arena is marked by the combination of fundamental aspects of liberal democracy with distinctive elements of authoritarianism. It lies basically in the maintenance of the vote as a collective force but without recognizing certain fundamental elements of liberal democracies, such as gender equality, independence of powers, freedom of the press, respect for human rights. Substantially, these factors represent dangers for leaders and their continuity in power.³

Without denying the importance of democratic institutions, their durability, or the respect for democratic values in the strengthening of democracy, it is necessary in any case to ask ourselves about the conditions in which the regression of liberal democracy is taking place. The precariousness of citizens' material and moral lifestyles, in a context of neoliberal capitalism, offers us critical points for reflection to explore this current decline.

Relevant to the present study is David Harvey's analysis of the consequences of the growth of poverty rates in the world. By subjecting the social protection of individuals to the demands and logic of the markets, neoliberalism, as a phenomenon that facilitates extreme rates of monopolization of wealth, has made the lives of millions of people precarious, forming a large block of vulnerable beings in the face of the world's demands.⁴ In this respect, it can be understood that the more a society is precarious, the greater the spaces of conflict that are created and, therefore, the greater the instruments created to make security a more sophisticated field. This is well known in South-Eastern Europe and Central America, where alternative social movements demanding not only participatory political democracy, but also the disappearance of natural resource extraction practices, the strengthening and respect of the rights of society as a whole, have consistently faced isolation, criminalization and persecution.

A precarious life is accompanied by the implementation of international security measures that produce surveillance zones, materialized in rigid borders and international military camps, where mechanisms of power and sovereignty are fabricated that make "danger" something recognizable, palpable, locatable and governable. These measures are not just about operational factors. They are about protecting the richest sectors from the most vulnerable. Surveillance zones also represent socially constructed spaces, where discourses of power and practices of racial and cultural legitimization are fabricated. From where affective dynamics are structured to fix the perception of risk, where projections, speculations are created. What is striking about this phenomenon, at least in international politics, is the way in which those lives and spaces that do not contribute, or at least do not offer what is expected, to the development and progress of the economic centers, are explained and identified. Risk zones that must be protected and isolated to avoid the growth of more risks.

Thinking about inequalities in Central America and Southeastern Europe leads us to reflect on the ways in which global capitalism increasingly produces and legitimizes uncertainties, fears

³ Katerina Kolozova and Niccolò Milanese (eds) (2023), "Introduction: On the Phenomenon of Illiberal Democracy in Europe", in *"Illiberal Democracies" in Europe. An authoritarian response to the crisis of liberalism*, Illiberalism Studies Program, The George Washington University, Washington D.C.

⁴ David Harvey (2003), *The New Imperialism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

and tensions through complex structures of social and economic exclusion. The consequences are observable both in the relations between citizens, populations divided in ethnical democracies, and between citizens and their governments. Socio-political dynamics show that what is at stake today is not only institutional, for example the state of democratic institutions, or authoritarian threats. It is also a dispute over how to live in the future. That is, the interaction between citizens and the environment in which they live. The countless ecological struggles aimed at protecting living spaces, increasingly seen as rich zones for the development of the future technology of the economic centers, are proof of this.

Those interested in these spaces will find a similarity in terms of a regional identity that is commonly conveyed within and beyond academia. They are described as major challenges to the international politics of their neighbors. In other words, they seem to carry “within them” threats to the maintenance of stability in their regions. From the arrival of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans to the construction of new states after the collapse of the former Yugoslavia. From the dismantling of Mesoamerican civilizations to the new models of democracy in Central America, a mythical or fantasized space, a sense of mistrust and a closed-mindedness have been constructed and promoted in both academic literature and diplomatic semantics, narrowing the understanding of these regions and simplifying the field of experience of many of those charged with understanding them.

Narratives that present them as spaces of permanent risk, as zones producing regional instabilities, attest to the importance of maintaining a simplistic and exclusivist perspective in order to maintain a hierarchy of international power.⁵ What is at stake here are the power relations that are woven into world politics through the propagation of ignorance, the implementation of international policies that produce violent and harmful effects on populations. Lisa Marie Borelli argues that “ignorance legitimizes structural violence as it limits the ‘other’s’ agency, for example by consciously creating knowledge gaps and not

⁵ Former president Donald Trump's comments about some Central American and African countries ("shithole countries" or "shitholes", are not unprecedented - https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-attacks-protections-for-immigrants-from-shithole-countries-in-oval-office-meeting/2018/01/11/bfc0725c-f711-11e7-91af-31ac729add94_story.html. (accessed 01.04.2023). They are part of a historical colonial process that arose with the arrival of European Empires after the fifteenth century and was expressed in policies ranging from genocide, elimination, forced assimilation, legal exclusion, forced labor to myths about the "disappearance of the Indians". For more details, see: Brian W. Dippie (1982), *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes & U.S. Indian Policy*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas. The Monroe Doctrine based on the "axis of evil" was revived during Trump's term in office, clearly recalling Washington's unilateralism and arrogance towards Latin America and the Caribbean. Similarly, and keeping the differences in mind, we can find in the European historical imaginary, a strong tendency to perceive Southeast Europe as a "dirty", "polluted" and "other" part of Europe. In other words, "the dark side of the collective Europe". See: Maria Todorova (1997), *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Dušan I. Bjelić and Obrad Savić (eds) (2005), *Balkan as Metaphor Between Globalization and Fragmentation*, The MIT Press. Such a distorted image of this part of Europe leads us to reflect about the nexus between knowledge, non-knowledge and power in international politics, and more particularly about the production of ignorance and of “secrecy zones” in knowledge production: Fabio Bego (2023), “Whose Europe? Brussels Museum Presents Western-centric Picture of Balkans” March 6th, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/03/06/whose-europe-brussels-museum-presents-western-centric-picture-of-balkans>. (accessed 16.03.2023).

acknowledging the other's aspirations and thus, voice."⁶ Humiliation can be defined as "any authoritarian prescription of lower rank than desired and not in conformity with established norms."⁷ The violation of the territorial integrity stipulated in the UN Charter is a major example of humiliation that marks contemporary international relations. This prescription leads to frustration, to the deterioration of the legitimacy of the international model. Humiliation appears as a deregulation that negatively transforms social relations and causes a loss of legitimacy of the international system because asymmetrical relations based on the logic of "the strong State reigns over the weak State" are encouraged.

The production of a historical narrative about these spaces in the second half of the 20th century and throughout the 21st century, excessively anchored in Eurocentric paradigms, is evidence of this impotence. Their conflicts have been used in various fields of knowledge as evidence of an internal dysfunctionality inherent to these zones, while maintaining in silence that this dysfunctionality has been essential for the design and promotion of political, security, economic and geopolitical programs.

Since the 1970s, events have largely been explained as the result of internal dynamics, from the perspective of the nation-state. Examples are numerous. From the emergence of anti-state currents, ethno-nationalist social movements in the former Yugoslavia, to the anti-imperialist movements in Central America. The civil wars, the various conflicts in Yugoslavia since 1992, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, as well as the conflicts in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua between 1980 and 1996, have generally been analyzed as events that respond exclusively to the dynamics of these regions, their elites, and the rupture of social ties. However, the involvement of extra-state interests in perpetuating conflicts is a knowledge gap.

It is essential to recognize that these regions have been approached as places of "dangers" to be "normalized". It is precisely a knowledge built on the terrain of threats that has dominated many development programs implemented there. Thanks to a semantics fabricated in terms of danger-security, it has been possible to accelerate the processes of implementing models of transition to democracy based on the liberalization of the economy and the construction of quasi-permanent security regimes. A complex perspective, in the holistic sense, is needed in order to integrate dynamics, internal and external levels in building political and social alternatives. Unilateral visions of a complex world establish and reproduce a system of discriminatory hierarchies and intensify inequalities. The construction of simplified and simplifying knowledge potentially contributes to the (re)production of an unequal socio-political order. One of the great tasks facing the social and political sciences today is to deconstruct the unilateral visions that explain social and international events.

One of the obstacles of a knowledge deeply rooted in the "danger-security" dichotomy is the lack of deep insights to better understand the diversity of socio-political phenomena in

⁶ Lisa Marie Borrelli, "Using ignorance as (un)conscious bureaucratic strategy", *Qualitative Studies*, 5:2 (2018), p. 97.

⁷ Bertrand Badie (2014), *Le temps des humiliés. Pathologie des relations internationales*, Odile Jacob, 2014; Evelin Lindner (2006), *Making Enemies: Humiliation and International Conflicts*, Londres, Praeger, Greenwood pub.

different contexts. Two experiences illustrate this. On the one hand, the impact of economic austerity policies created by those who produce economic crises on the degradation of democratic institutions in countries where the construction of the rule of law is at stake, as is the case in the two regions mentioned here. On the other hand, an international model that protects the logic of "zones of influence". It is fundamental to think about the deterioration of liberal democracy in terms of otherness: How do we perceive and influence the "other"? How does the construction of the perception of the "other" produce discursive fields that have material effects on bodies? How do we (re)produce stigmas, vulnerabilities, polarizations in our interactions with the "other"? If pluralism is one of the bulwarks of liberal democracy, can we say that the liberal international system is based on plurality? What image does the world receive of Western democracies when economic crises emerge in them, activating processes of impoverishment of moral and material life in spaces where democracy depends on a thread?

2. Economic Insecurity in the Authoritarian Narrative

Austerity breeds debt. The indebted are subjected to extremely powerful violence and domination, capable of coercing, disciplining and moralizing entire populations, which thus become much more docile and governable.⁸ By establishing debt as a social engine, fear is manufactured and localized, towards oneself and the environment, creating collective bonds and surfaces of collective bodies.⁹

Three major phases mark the end of the uninterrupted growth of the world economy after 1945. The first corresponds to the 1973 oil crisis. The rise in the price of hydrocarbons, reflected in the manufacturing costs of many products, led to a decline in industrial production, soaring inflation and unemployment. Since then, the volatility of the price of this natural resource has continued to raise questions about economic "growth". A second stage appeared with the advent of a "floating economy" in 1990, again marked by the rising price of oil and the scarcity of capital. The acceleration of deindustrialization and the intensification of competition between markets became two of the main protagonists of this decade. The interest in reducing and understanding inflation overshadowed the importance of the effects of unemployment and poverty. The priority was to reduce regulation in the belief that this would create a more dynamic economy. It should not be forgotten that the effects of the transformation of the world economy in the 1990s fell mainly on a large number of sectors and workers. A new phase of global impoverishment began with the financial and banking crisis of 2008. Governments and central banks intervened massively to save the global banking system through severe austerity policies, once again hitting hard those in society who are most vulnerable to the erosion of the economy. They are bearing the full brunt of austerity, tax increases and the abandonment of the state that was supposed to protect citizens.

⁸ Maurizio Lazzarato (2014), *Gouverner par la dette*, Les Prairies Ordinaires.

⁹ Sara Ahmed (2004), "Affective Economies", *Social Text*, 79, Vol 22, N. 2, p. 128.

The financial crisis of 2008 is one of the main elements that allow us to understand not only the decline of liberal democracy, the different facets of the vulnerability of citizens, but also the strength with which the movements of resistance to economic globalization appear. A close relationship is established between the economic crisis and the indebtedness of citizens, which has a positive impact on the new ways of doing politics of leaders who are preparing to challenge liberalism. This has occupied a central place in understanding the revitalization of authoritarian populist movements that make economic debt one of the pillars of their political agendas.¹⁰ The aftermath of the 2008 crisis served to build the image of a "people", of citizens indebted to the banking system. The defense of the interests of vulnerable debtors vis-à-vis the international financial system becomes a political instrument that allows the rapprochement between populist leaders and the popular classes. Vulnerability in situations of economic debt provides a theme that generates political organization, as well as a clear example to identify the "enemy" and offers a great opportunity for those leaders willing to explore citizens' discontent with the international economic system.

Popular dissatisfaction with the functioning of international liberal institutions is triggered by the lack of transparency of the international financial sector. These institutions are then perceived as disrespectful to citizens, marginalizing welfare, savings and work from everyday life. Austerity policies have a direct impact on the vulnerability of certain social sectors. Studies show that economic constraints mainly affect low-skilled workers, while high-skilled workers tend to benefit in countries with open economies.¹¹ The decline in social support, the collapse of social safety nets and public transfers generated by austerity policies have a strong negative impact on the most vulnerable citizens and generate political disenchantment with liberal democracy.¹²

When the leaders of the world's major economic centers declare that harsh austerity policies are necessary to save the banking system, often through the suppression of democratic rights and the reduction of the rule of law, the strength of populist movements should not surprise us.¹³

While the debate on the causes and effects of the post-2008 economic crisis was bearing theoretical and experimental fruit, Oxfam published a study on social inequalities in the world. The conclusions are stark. "Almost half of the world's wealth is now owned by just one percent of the population, and seven out of ten people live in countries where economic inequality

¹⁰ Calomiris, Charles W, Stephen Haber (2014), *Fragile by Design: The Political Origins of Banking Crises and Scarce Credit*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

¹¹ Jensen, J. Bradford, Dennis P. Quinn and Stephen Weymouth (2017), "Winners and Losers in International Trade: The Effects on US Presidential Voting." *International Organization*, 71(3):423–457.

¹² Ritsa Panagiotou, "The Impact of the Economic Crisis on the Western Balkans and their EU Accession Prospects", *EUI RSCAS*, 2012/64 - <http://hdl.handle.net/1814/24557>. (accessed 08.01.2023); Alejandro Aráuz L, "El impacto de la crisis en América Central", *Nueva Sociedad*, <https://nuso.org/articulo/el-impacto-de-la-crisis-en-america-central/>. (accessed 08.01.2023).

¹³ Gabriel, R D, M Klein and A S Pessoa (2022), "The Political Costs of Austerity", *Sveriges Riksbank Working Paper No. 418*; Guiso, L, M Morelli, T Sonno and H Herrera (eds) (2022), "The Financial Drivers of Populism in Europe", *CEPR Press Discussion*, Paper No. 17332. <https://cepr.org/publications/dp17332>. (accessed 12.02.2023).

has increased in the last 30 years."¹⁴ This leads to a second observation: the former own as much as the latter put together. A clear example of the excesses of capitalism. Is it understandable, then, that a feeling of humiliation and anger should arise among citizens, leading them to support populist uprisings against those they themselves define as "enemies of the people"?

This leads us to think that the political figures and movements that contest liberalism are born in places where the material conditions of life deteriorate, in terrains where democracy loses its relevance.¹⁵ The weakening of social conditions is their richest terrain.

Populist movements of our time feed on the social precariousness and despair of a society marginalized by economic degradation.¹⁶ This indicates that contemporary populisms are not the cause of the weakening of democracy. They are the derivative of the defensive reaction of millions of individuals who feel threatened by the uncertainty resulting from a democratic and international model with high levels of inequality.¹⁷ With this, we can even think about the role of populist elites who claim to embody "the people". These rulers, projecting a *médiocratisation* of politics and power, mostly devoid of a coherent and long-term social program for future generations, and although democratically elected, accurately transcribe rhetorically the social malaise of millions of voters.¹⁸ However, concrete solutions to the structural problems of society are replaced by laws to stop migration on the fly, to revitalize exclusionary narratives around gender and race issues, to transform presidential power, or even to form a model antagonistic to the great international power groups (European Union or the United States, for example).¹⁹

Socio-economic inequalities allow us to see clearly how they have an impact on the political world. The uncertainty and anger that emerge in the face of social and economic deterioration, the dissatisfaction with future forms of existence, where a gap is established

¹⁴ Ricardo Fuentes Nieva, Nick Galasso (2014), "Working for the Few. Political Capture and Economic Inequality", *Oxfam*, Briefing Paper, 20 January.

¹⁵ I do not intend to reduce the strengthening of populist policies based on the "friend-enemy" logic to the economic terrain. Populism is complex precisely because it is versatile. Numerous studies have shown that there are other areas in which populism plays a role: Mike Slaven (2021), "Populism and Securitization: The Corrosion of Elite Security Authority in a US–Mexico Border State", *Journal of Global Security Studies*, Volume 6, Issue 4, December; Pippa Norris, Ronald Inglehart (2019), *Cultural Backlash. Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*, Cambridge University Press; Benjamin Moffitt (2017), *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, Stanford University Press; Andreas Schedler (2006), *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition*, Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc; Yves Meny, Sarel Yves (2002); Gideon Lasco (2020), "Medical populism and the COVID-19 pandemic, Global", *Global Public Health*, 15:10, 1417-1429.

¹⁶ Sarah Engler & David Weisstanner (2021), "The threat of social decline: income inequality and radical right support", *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28:2, 153-173; Stoetzer F. Lukas, Giesecke Johannes & Klüver Heike (2021), "How does income inequality affect the support for populist parties?", *Journal of European Public Policy*.

¹⁷ Patrick Heller (2020), "The age of reaction: Retrenchment populism in India and Brazil", *International Sociology*, 35(6), 590–609.

¹⁸ Wolfgang Aschauer (2022), "Societal Malaise in Turbulent Times: Introducing a New Explanatory Factor for Populism From a Cross-National Europe-Wide Perspective" in Heinisch Reinhard, Holtz-Bacha Christina, Mazzoleni Oscar (eds), *Political Populism, A Handbook*, Vol.3, Baden-Baden, Germany, Nomos.

¹⁹ Roger Eatwell, Matthew Goodwin (2018), *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*, Pelican Book, UK.

between what is desired and what exists, are determining factors in the study of illiberalism.²⁰ And if we add to this the disillusionment, abstention and apathy towards liberal democracy, the deep distrust towards the political institutions in charge of protecting democracy, the growing gap between the governed and the rulers, we can then follow the path that has prepared the explosion of the frustrations of individuals.

Contemporary populist movements speak of their political programs as an emergency measure to save a "people" in danger. This centrality in their discourses can also be understood from an analytical perspective based on "immunity". That is, a logic that sees the social space as an organism whose "identity" is threatened by a "foreign body" that seeks to weaken it, to endanger it. This body must be eliminated in order to reverse the vulnerability. In this way, the social system is presented as a "battlefield" where people and their "enemies" confront each other. It is not surprising, then, that populist leaders build their rhetoric and programs around the "losers" of the liberal order. The rhetoric that contextualizes vulnerability in the political arena and turns it into an anti-establishment struggle has undoubtedly been one of their great popularity manoeuvres.

Regions adjacent to major centers of economic power, such as Central America and Southeastern Europe, offer several avenues for understanding the continuity of authoritarianism in contexts where participatory democracy is proposed as a way out of autocratic drift. These regions, often seen as the bearers of structural problems that hinder the consolidation of democracy, are confronted with external factors that keep alive institutional and cultural legacies of an authoritarian past, stigmatization, stereotypes and simplifications as tools of legitimization of an international political order, as well as the indifference and disengagement of democratic institutions and the state in the interests of the common good.²¹ New research suggests that the economic aspect is a key element in understanding the success of authoritarian leaders today. In the post-communist regimes of the Western Balkans, economic austerity has allowed the reinforcement of authoritarianism around the figure of a strong leader capable of achieving a certain level of economic security. Economic security has been one of the rhetorical forms that have enriched the semantics of the security narrative in general, hiding structural problems such as the falsification of elections, the weakening of the autonomy of powers, the manipulation of democratic institutions, the polarization of society.²² The construction of a salvation narrative has found fertile ground in Central America and, more generally, throughout Latin America. The structuring of authoritarian populist programs defines the central figure of the leader as a saviour who narrates political reality in terms of an apocalyptic scenario against which he must fight to lead the people into a new era. The use of austerity in populist narratives allows us to observe the use of guiding images, the role that messianic ideas can play in structuring the

²⁰ Guillem Rico, Marc Guinjoan, Eva Anduiza (2017), "The Emotional Underpinnings of Populism: How Anger and Fear Affect Populist Attitudes", *Swiss Political Science Review*, 23(4): 444–461; Sarah Harrison (2020), "Democratic Frustration: Concept, Dimensions and Behavioural Consequences", *Societies* 10, no. 1: 19.

²¹ These factors lead us to think about key concepts to understand the retreat of the liberal order: Stigma (Erving Goffman), ontological security (Anthony Giddens), social bonds (Emile Durkheim).

²² Miran Lavrič & Florian Bieber, (2021), "Shifts in Support for Authoritarianism and Democracy in the Western Balkans", *Problems of Post-Communism*, 68:1, 17-26.

image of the leader. The populist perspective presupposes clear moral oppositions and, at the same time, with its claim to build a new idyllic era.²³

In 2021, three economists undertook the task of conducting a comparative study to demonstrate that there is a close relationship between populism and fragility. "Populism is bad economics", so begin the conclusion of this work.²⁴ This report demonstrates in detail that populist leaders, through expansionary fiscal policies, create a fleeting reality of a positive economy. Ephemeral because the results show that populist governments end their terms with economic and political crises that increase or maintain social inequality. According to the authors, this has direct consequences at all levels of society. One of them is the increase in the so-called "brain drain" as a way out for qualified young people who do not want to get lost in political uncertainty. At the same time, there is an erosion of institutions, which translates into a decline in institutional quality. This is also related to the erosion of the judiciary, especially the loss of its independence, and the plurality of the media.

3. A Look at the Peripheries in a time of Geopolitical Destabilization

"We find unacceptable this arbitrary world order, in which third and fourth category countries can exist, while those who think they are civilized never tire of making invasions, wars, financial speculations and crucifying us with their inflation over and over again."²⁵ Speeches denouncing the structure of the liberal international order are becoming more and more frequent at the United Nations assemblies. States, historically on the margins of international decision-making, are increasingly calling for an international order in which otherness is the order of the day. In which arrogance, indecision and ambiguity give way to the recognition of the "other" in the solution of their problems.²⁶

The past three decades in Central America and Southeastern Europe have been marked by the art of economic governance. With the demise of the Soviet Union, a variety of market-based instruments were deployed to provide policy advice to facilitate the transition to economic liberalization. Thus, to varying degrees, their dependence on the United States and the European Union increased as their economies opened up. Gradually, and with the end of civil wars that left deep fissures in the social spheres, these spaces embodied in international semantics the achievements to boast the merits of offshoring.

In the face of the geopolitical turmoil caused by the war in Ukraine (2022-), this practice is still in force. Both regions, with political regimes plagued by corruption and burdened by legal

²³ Laura Torres Arenas, "El populismo y la política de la salvación en América Latina", *Diálogo político*. <https://dialogopolitico.org/debates/el-populismo-y-la-politica-de-la-salvacion-en-america-latina/>. (accessed 13.02.2023).

²⁴ Manuel Funke, Moritz Schularick, Christoph Trebesch (2020), "Populist leaders and the economy", *ECONtribute* Discussion Paper, No. 036, University of Bonn and University of Cologne, Reinhard Selten Institute (RSI), Bonn and Cologne.

²⁵ Senacit HN, "Discurso Presidenta Xiomara Castro ONU", *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o3xVfoZyK6U>. (accessed 22.11.2022).

²⁶ Bertrand Badie (2016), *Nous ne sommes plus seuls au monde*, La Découverte.

systems backward by US and European standards, but with skilled and cheap labor, are again at the center of the geo-economic game as key nearshoring zones.

Olivér Várhelyi, European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement, does not hesitate to state that, in the face of the uncertainty of the conflict in Ukraine (2022-), the future of the "reconfiguration of European technological production"²⁷ lies in Southeastern Europe. This will be done through direct investments and the relocation of part of the technological industry to its neighbourhood. While international decision-makers look with new eyes at the advantages of this "permanent risk" zone, worker abuses continue to expand the terrain of the vulnerable. However, international modernization projects do not seem to include cardinal human security issues in their development perspectives. Southeastern Europe does not cease to present challenges on the interaction between business and human rights, where disrespect for workers' rights, abuse of women and inequality structure the work environment. It is essential to realize that the logic of contradictions has a place in the relations with the Balkan states. Everything that is strongly rejected in Western Europe, is maintained in its nearby peripheries.²⁸ However, the war in Ukraine has revived the progressive discourse of some European leaders in favour of a rapid enlargement of the EU. By organizing the relocation of its industry, Brussels is accompanying its neighborhood to become the "production zone" of the new markets, an implicit objective that has not disappeared since the disappearance of Yugoslavia.

In a similar way, there is a constant since the 2000s in Central America. Foreign investments are promoted as a key act for their economic development.²⁹ Good air connectivity, congruent time zones, relative proximity that favours maritime shipments are now mixed with the Call to Action initiative promoted by U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris, which seeks to counteract the new challenges imposed by the advance of Chinese investments in Central America. Investing in the offshoring of proximity in the textile sector and technological parts, in preparation for the energy revolution of the automotive sector in developed countries, speaks of the return of Washington's presence in the region.³⁰ This interest is focused on specific sectors: maquiladoras, non-traditional agricultural exports, tourism, mining and megaprojects. All this is accompanied by low wages and taxes, decentralization and privatization of public goods.³¹

²⁷ Olivér Várhelyi (2022), "Speech by Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi at the OECD High-Level conference on south east Europe - Human Capital Flight – Shaping the Future Together", *European Commission Website*, 17 May. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/varhelyi/announcements/speech-commissioner-oliver-varhelyi-oecd-high-level-conference-south-east-europe-human-capital_en. (accessed 22.10.2022).

²⁸ Jernej Letnar Čerňič and Taygeti Michalakea (eds.), "Business and Human Rights in South East Europe", *Working Papers, Forum Transregionale Studien* 10/2023. https://www.reconstitution.eu/fileadmin/bilder/re_constitution/WorkingPaper_10-2023_Letnar_Cernic_and_Michalakea_final.pdf. (accessed 07.04.2023).

²⁹ Santa-Cruz Arturo (2019), Chap 7: "United States' Economic Statecraft toward Central America" *US Hegemony and the Americas. Power and Economic Statecraft in International Relations*, Routledge.

³⁰ McHenry Patrick, Bill Pascrell (2022), "Now is the time to drive investment and nearshore production to the US and Central America", *The Hill*, March 22.

³¹ Chomski Aviva (2021), *Central America's Forgotten History. Revolution, Violence and the Roots of Migration*, Boston, Beacon Press, p. 205.

U.S. and EU investments in the economies of its neighbors are mainly explained as efforts to boost economic development, curb the brain drain³², migration flows as well as strategies in the face of geopolitical uncertainty. However, local labor standards are often not the focus of development discourse. In 2023, the average monthly salary in Guatemala, Salvador and Honduras will not exceed €500 euros monthly.³³ At the same time, in Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, it ranges between 400 and 800 euros monthly.³⁴ If the dynamics of the "third world" has lost weight in international discourse, it is still relevant in the daily lives of the citizens who experience it. These regions suggest that the existence of "grey zones" has a logic that gives rise to numerous contradictions in the promises of the liberal order. The analogy between these two regions, mostly invisible to the public, rarely escapes foreign policymakers who, despite their differences, see their neighbors as a means of minimizing the impact of international power struggles in the struggle for a new "world order".

Despite a marked worsening of social, economic and political conditions, they are among the essential zones for the future industrial growth of large economic centers. As a paradise of rare metals, everything leads us to believe that their riches lie not only in their cultural plurality, but also in their biodiversity, essential to carry out the next technological revolutions, dependent on the extraction of natural resources.³⁵ But degradation is not only environmental. It also has an impact on the emergence of new tensions, conflicts and the weakening of the fragile stability of the population. In Central America and Southeastern Europe, discontent, frustration, social anger, the imperceptibility of the suffering of citizens, uncertainty, in a context of international competition, complete the report of the crisis of globalization, triggering social mobilizations calling for structural transformations in political and social life.³⁶

³² Op.cit., Várhelyi (2022).

³³ In order of citation: Gobierno de Guatemala, Ministerio de trabajo y prevención social, <https://www.mintrabajo.gob.gt/index.php/dgt/salario-minimo>. (accessed 22.10.2022); Gobierno del Salvador, Ministerio de trabajo y prevención social, <https://www.mtps.gob.sv/2021/07/31/nuevas-tarifas-de-salarios-minimos/>. (accessed 22.10.2022); Secretaria de trabajo y seguridad social, Republica de Honduras, <http://www.trabajo.gob.hn/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Tabla-Salario-Minimo-2020.pdf>. (accessed 22.10.2022).

³⁴ In order of citation: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2022/HtmlE/G20221267.html>. (accessed 22.10.2022); Monstat, <https://www.monstat.org/eng/novosti.php?id=3592>. (accessed 22.10.2022); Makstat, https://www.stat.gov.mk/Default_en.aspx. (accessed 22.10.2022); Agency of Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, <https://bhas.gov.ba/Home/?lang=en>. (accessed 22.10.2022).

³⁵ Saša Dragojlo and Ivica Mladenović, "Convoitise européenne sur le lithium serbe", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, September 2022; Alfaro Alexandra, "Centroamérica, reino del extractivismo impune", *El Faro*, 23th Oct 2022.

³⁶ I think of two initiatives, though not the only ones, of civil resistance that have had a considerable impact on the political identity of the citizen in contexts of growing authoritarianism: *Ne Naidivo Beograd NDB* (Do not let Belgrade drown) and *Resistencia Pacifica La Puya* (Guatemala). Both initiatives represent a new political action that puts at the center the defense of the rights of citizens and the inclusion of all sectors of society in the defense of environment. Tatar Marius (2019), "Are the Balkans Different? Mapping Protest Politics in Post-communist Southeastern Europe", in Dario Brentin, Florian Bieber (eds), *Social Movements in the Balkans. Rebellion and Protest from Maribor to Taksim*, New York, Taylor & Francis.

Rule of Law: Lessons from Central America and Southeastern Europe

Today, Central America and Southeastern Europe are increasingly exposed to the confrontation between established great powers, of the G7 rank, and emerging economies seeking to gain international ground in order to adapt to the globalization of capital. Although their colonial histories, economic and human security conditions may differ, these places have become zones where the future norms of regional sovereignty are being produced, in the midst of a struggle between democratic capitalism and authoritarian capitalism. They are an important example of the contradictions of the great powers, where the state of exception is an almost permanent practice.

According to Avishai Margalit a decent society is one in which institutions do not humiliate their citizens.³⁷ This allows us to think not only about how citizens see themselves represented in their local or national institutions, but also about the treatment they receive from international institutions which, in order to establish new bonds of stability, are called upon to transform colonial mental and material structures. Society is humiliating in its concrete way of treating those who depend on it. Society which, at the same time, upholds values of respect that should be accorded to all human beings. Here the implicit argument reveals that a decent society does not use its institutions to stigmatize and dehumanize those it governs or with whom it interacts.

Thinking of "decent society" as the basis of the rule of law is an undeniably topical issue. Above all, because of the irrefutable feeling of distrust among citizens towards the institutions and organizations that are the foundation of the modern democratic system. The omnipresence of this distrust in countries that differ greatly in terms of political system, standard of living and culture poses extremely important problems. This situation leads us to analyze not only the state of institutions and the rule of law, but also that of neo-liberal governance, which demands from its citizens an individual or collective resilient attitude to face institutional dysfunctions. It is essential today to reflect on the factors that lead the collective to lose its capacity for action and reaction in the face of institutions submerged in a single format of consciousness that makes society as a whole a society at risk.

This phenomenon can easily be overlooked as long as politics is trivialized, as long as truths are transformed into a linguistic game, the local into the global, the real into fiction, utopia into dystopia, ideas into advertising, and totality into fragments.³⁸ This is not to claim that the idea of resilience is reducible to politics or neoliberal governance. What is equally interesting is precisely how citizens react to the crisis of neoliberalism, that is, to the retreat of neoliberal institutions, a process in which institutional violence presents itself in various guises. This phenomenon of transformation allows us to question how human beings adapt to abrupt changes in their environment.

³⁷ Avishai Margalit (1998), *The Decent Society*, 2d edition, Harvard University Press.

³⁸ Jelena Djordjevic, "Cultural Studies – From discourse to reality: case of Serbia", *Srpska politička misao*, n°3/2018/ 25. vol. 61, p. 83-99.

It is important to think of a framework for discussion, where a change in the very concept of otherness is imposed within States, as well as in the way they interact. Otherness is an instrument of liberation of critical judgment and a mechanism of liberation of the faculty of judgment, from which the interlocutors can judge and accept or not their own everyday life. It is up to individuals to judge their institutions on the basis of their experiences with them, and not to accept the conclusions of a consensus in which they themselves have not participated.

By (re)constructing the role of alterity, one (re)constructs at the same time the role of the human being in the world, the role of the citizen in the international community. This citizen would have as his main objective the rescue and the use of his critical judgment and his subjectivity. Two factors that have been hidden by the domination of a conscience founded on theologies of all kinds. It is cardinal especially when globalization and other integration processes in recent times appear more and more not only as a potential or immediate, violent and unilateral imposition of a model, but above all as a historical process that takes place in the form of spontaneous adoption by consensus.

The regression of liberal democracy clearly shows a structural change in the way individuals relate to it. The transformation is driven by anger, discomfort, humiliation, indignation, uncertainty about the future, and courage. Analyzing the erosion of liberal democracy by ignoring or hierarchizing these combined forces leads to a simplistic understanding of the contexts in which the current changes are taking place. How do these fears work? How do they affect the domestic and foreign policies of states? What role do they play in polarization? To this can be added the dynamics of an international "order" that manufactures and legitimizes exclusionary policies, in terms of utility. The deepening of social inequalities mixed with a feeling of international humiliation creates an (almost) perfect terrain for the perpetuation of new authoritarianisms. The material and moral impoverishment of citizens is one of the pillars of these, particularly in places where human rights, the rule of law, and human security represent a key factor for coexistence and the social fabric. The encounter between social inequality and the feeling of being treated as "second and third class countries" are two cardinal values in the maintenance and perpetuation of "a state of crisis" conducive to the preservation of anti-democratic policies.

Contemporary authoritarian populisms are often considered the great political phenomena of our time. A methodological change is needed in the study of populisms in order to examine this phenomenon not as a cause, but as a consequence. A consequence of an international world based on exclusionary schemes and "social infantilism", which seeks to explain social and international phenomena from the perspective of the "collective responsibility" for all evils, and that its elimination will bring lasting peace. This approach ignores the fact that events are closely linked to historical and social processes that produce situations and exchanges. Complex thinking, reflecting reflection and cooperation, will allow relativizing the scope of Manicheanism and one-sided "thinking".

Forum Transregionale Studien e.V.
Wallotstraße 14
14193 Berlin
T: +49 (0) 30 89001-430
office@trafo-berlin.de
www.forum-transregionale-studien.de