

A large crowd of people at a protest, with a sign that says "GAME OVER". The image is overlaid with a teal color filter.

GAME  
OVER

# THE ARAB SPRING:

## PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

EDITED BY  
**ŞENER AKTÜRK**  
**TAREK CHERKAoui**

TRT WORLD  
**research**  
**centre**

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## Foreword

*Mehmet Zahid Sobacı*

*TRT, Director General*

As the world, and our region in particular, continue to reflect on the historical significance of the events that came to be known as the Arab Spring, *The Arab Spring: Past, Present, and Future* offers a deeply reflective exploration of its historical roots, its successes and failings, and its consequences for the region today and in the future.

In the course of the last decade, the Middle East has witnessed profound change. While some of those changes have undoubtedly given cause for hope, an honest and sober assessment of the present situation across the Arab Spring geography will inevitably conclude that, taken as a whole, the events of the last decade have left the region in a more challenging and difficult state than when they began. Thus, it is arguably more important than ever to undertake an accounting of the past decade in order to understand how and why the countries that experienced the so-called Arab Spring, in all its various phases and forms, are where they are today. As several chapters in the present volume point out, the effects of the Arab Spring as well as its historical antecedents continue to impact the region, more often than not, for the worse. It is for precisely this reason that the contents of this edited volume continue to be relevant, particularly as the region continues to grapple with shifting regional dynamics and an emerging international scene characterised by multipolarity and the return of great power politics.

The present volume has brought together a diverse array of scholars and researchers from around the world to explore and examine both the historical and present implications and ramifications of the Arab Spring on the strategic, political, and diplomatic dynamics of the Middle East. The authors who contributed to this TRT World Research Centre publication, co-edited by Prof. Şener Aktürk and Dr. Tarek Cherkaoui shared their

expertise in exploring topics ranging from macro-level reflections on the successes and failures of the last decade in the region, to *longue-durée* historical perspectives, including an attempt to situate the Arab Spring in its world historical context. The volume also includes numerous chapters exploring country-specific dynamics from Syria and Libya to Lebanon and Algeria.

Through its broad range of topics, breadth of perspectives, and diversity of voices, the present volume presents a significant contribution to the scholarly literature on the contemporary Middle East in general and the Arab Spring in particular. It is my sincere hope that the chapters included in this volume will not only broaden the intellectual horizons of their readers, but also open avenues for further discussions amongst academics, researchers, analysts, and policymakers as the region continues to struggle with numerous challenges and underlying grievances exacerbated by acute global instability resulting from, in no small part, the ongoing Russian war on Ukraine. I am proud of the work that continues to be thoughtfully undertaken by our colleagues at the TRT World Research Centre on this project and beyond and hopeful that the present volume will serve to enrich the scholarly discussions for years to come on some of the most critical aspects of the legacy of the Arab Spring.

## Preface

*Şener Aktürk*

*Tarek Cherkaoui*

Major parts of this book project were completed in 2021 as part of a long-term project spearheaded by the TRT World Research Centre. This also means that many chapters were completed during the second year of the pandemic, which was an unprecedented experience for many people around the world, which includes our contributing authors. First and foremost, we thank the eleven contributing authors who responded positively to our invitation and submitted their chapters under time pressure in such unpredictable times. We also thank them for responding positively and promptly to all feedback throughout the production process. In addition to being a contributing author, Michael Arnold carefully proofread and commented on all the chapters. We would like to thank also the senior management of the Education and Research Department of TRT (current and former) for allowing us to conduct this project commemorating the 10th anniversary of the Arab Spring.

The Middle East in general, and the specific countries and the processes that are discussed throughout this book, underwent major changes during the writing and production of this book, which undoubtedly posed formidable challenges for our analyses. This is the well-known risk of examining ongoing processes, but a risk that we have taken nonetheless, and one that makes many of our conclusions necessarily provisional. Our only major regret is that, despite having invited more women than men to participate in this collaborative endeavour, our contributing authors include only one woman.

Looking at the past, present, and equally importantly, the future of the Arab Spring, this edited volume provides reasons for cautious optimism

despite broken promises, betrayals, mass suffering, and international apathy that the chapters of this book record and explain from different angles. The catastrophic destruction of the Second World War gave birth to the most impressive scheme of regional integration in Europe, which finds its institutional embodiment in the European Union. We hope that the current doom and gloom in the aftermath of the first Arab Spring will motivate and enable similar, if not even more robust forms of peaceful cooperation, prosperity, and reconstruction in the region.

## Notes on Contributors

**Şener Aktürk** is a Professor in the Department of International Relations at Koç University. He is a scholar of comparative politics, with a focus on comparative politics of ethnicity, religion, and nationalism. After completing his BA and MA at the University of Chicago and his PhD in political science at the University of California, Berkeley, he was a postdoctoral fellow at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies and a Visiting Lecturer at the Department of Government at Harvard University. His book, *Regimes of Ethnicity and Nationhood in Germany, Russia, and Türkiye* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), received the 2013 Joseph Rothschild book prize from the Association for the Study of Nationalities. His articles were published in *World Politics*, *Perspectives on Politics*, *Comparative Politics*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, *Mediterranean Politics*, *Social Science Quarterly*, *European Journal of Sociology*, *Nationalities Papers*, *Problems of Post-Communism*, *Turkish Studies*, *Middle Eastern Studies*, *Osteuropa*, *Theoria*, *Ab Imperio*, *All Azimuth*, *Insight Türkiye*, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, *Central Eurasian Studies Review*, *Perceptions*, and various edited books. He is the recipient of the Peter Odegard Award, Marie Curie International Reintegration Grant, Baki Komsuoglu Social Sciences Encouragement Award, Kadir Has Social Sciences Prize, TUBA Young Scientist Award, BAGEP Science Academy Award, and TÜBİTAK Incentive Prize.

**Michael Arnold** is an analyst and researcher focused on the geopolitics of the Middle East. His work focuses on great power competition in the Middle East, modern Arab and Middle Eastern political and social history – with a particular focus on Lebanon -, the nexus of religious and political authority in the Arab world and the history of Islamic thought. He is currently a researcher and editor at the TRT World Research Centre and a PhD candidate in Arab and Middle East history at the American University of Beirut.

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*Ali Bakir* is a research assistant professor at Qatar University's Ibn Khaldon Center for Humanities and Social Sciences. Before joining Qatar University, he worked as a senior adviser at Qatar's Embassy in Ankara, head of the Gulf Studies Unit at the Middle East Studies Centre (ORSAM), senior researcher at the Centre for Middle Eastern and North African Studies of the International Strategic Research Organisation, and a researcher and senior editor at (AIWA) Group for defence and economy. As a political analyst and consultant, Dr. Bakir has more than a decade of professional experience working with senior officials, decision-makers, and stakeholders for governmental, non-governmental, and private sector institutions. He had his education, fieldwork, and work experience in several countries, including Kuwait, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Türkiye, and Qatar. Bakir is specialised in geopolitics and security trends in the Middle East. His areas of expertise include IR, Middle Eastern Politics, Great Power Politics in the Middle East, and Foreign Policy Analysis. He focuses on issues such as Türkiye's foreign and defence policies, Türkiye- Arab/Gulf relations, as well as small states' foreign and defence policies – Qatar. Bakir has been featured as an expert at various international conferences, panels, and workshops, including those held by RAND, Carnegie Endowment-MEC, Brookings-Doha, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, and Friedrich Naumann Foundation, among others.

**Richard Falk** is Milbank Professor of International Law Emeritus at Princeton University and is currently Chair of Global Law, Queen Mary University London, and Research Fellow, Orfalea Center of Global Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara. His most recent book is *Public Intellectual: The Life of a Citizen Pilgrim* (2021). He served as UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Occupied Palestine for the Human Rights Council from 2008-14. He is currently completing a book with Hans von Sponeck devoted to a realistic approach to strengthen the United Nations. Falk also serves as Senior Vice President of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, was co-founder with David Whyte of the Centre of Environmental Crime at Queen Mary, and is acting as co-director with Augusto Lopez-Clarros of a project on Global Governance in the contexts of weaponry and dispute settlement. He published a book of poems in 2015 entitled *Waiting for Rainbows* and is currently working on a new collection. Falk's views on contemporary global issues can be found on his blog, 'Justice in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,' <[richardfalk.wordpress.com](http://richardfalk.wordpress.com)>. Furthermore, an edited book of essays evaluating his work has been recently published under the title *Justice and World Order*.

***Nur Günay*** got her bachelor's degree from the Department of International Relations at Dokuz Eylül University. She is currently pursuing her master's degree at the Turkish National Police Academy, Department of International Security. Mainly focusing on Syria and Iraq, Günay has carried out studies on terrorism, counterterrorism, and Türkiye's Middle East policy as well. She works as a researcher in projects carried out within the scope of security studies of various governmental agencies.

***Mujeeb R. Khan*** is an American Muslim who was a Fulbright Research-Scholar in the Persian Gulf and has published widely on the politics and history of the modern Muslim World, drawing on field work conducted in Arabic, Turkish, Serbo-Croatian-Bosnian, and Hindi-Urdu. He holds advanced degrees in Political Science from the University of Chicago and UC Berkeley. His latest scholarly publication was the framework chapter in the main English language academic work on the Gulenist Coup attempt: "Türkiye's July 15 Coup: What Happened and Why?" University of Utah Press, 2018, which he helped organize and edit. From 1992-1995 he also helped organize opposition to the genocide of Bosnian Muslims in the US, Türkiye, and the Persian Gulf, which he alludes to in his current chapter.

**M. Tahir Kilavuz** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Marmara University. His research interests include authoritarianism, regime change, religion and politics, and survey analysis, both in the MENA and in the cross-regional setting. More specifically, he examines the durability of authoritarian regimes and transitions both to other types of dictatorship and to democracy, with a particular emphasis on how institutions shape and constrain the behaviour of political regimes and the masses. He received his PhD in Political Science from the University of Notre Dame in 2019 and MA from Koç University. He also served as a post-doctoral research fellow at the Belfer Centre's Middle East Initiative at Harvard University.

**İdlir Lika** is an Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Ibn Haldun University. He received a BSc from Middle East Technical University, an MA degree from Bilkent University and a PhD in International Relations from Koç University. Lika specialises in comparative politics of ethnicity and nationalism with a regional focus on Southeast European / Balkan countries. The article version of his dissertation "Nationhood cleavages and ethnic conflict: a comparative analysis of postcommunist Bulgaria, Montenegro and North Macedonia," published in *Mediterranean Politics*, was selected as runner-up for the 2021 "Richard Gillespie Mediterranean Prize". His research has been published in top area studies journals such as *Mediterranean Politics*, *Problems of Post-Communism* and *Ethnic and Racial Studies*.

**Ziad Majed** is the Elliott E. Burdette Professor at the American University of Paris. He teaches History, Politics and International Relations and writes on Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian and Arab affairs as well as on regional political transitions and crises. After graduating in Economics from the American University of Beirut, he obtained a Master's degree in Arabic Literature, then a PhD in Political Science from Sciences Po Paris. Majed has been involved since 1994 in research work and reform campaigns related to political processes, civil society causes in Lebanon and other Arab countries. For the last twenty years, he has been regularly publishing articles and papers in Arabic (in *Now Lebanon*, *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, *Al-Hayat*, *Aljazeera Centre for Studies*, the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, *Daraj* and *Megaphone*) and in French (in *L'Orient Littéraire*, *Mediapart*, *Le Monde*, *L'Express*, *Libération* and *AOC*). He is a board member in Lebanese and French cultural institutes, and a lecturer at international festivals and annual conferences. His books include "Syrie, la révolution orpheline", published in Arabic, French and - in an updated version - in German, and "Dans la tête de Bachar Al-Assad" (with Subhi Hadidi and Farouk Mardam-Bey) in French.

**Ömer Özkizilcik** is an independent foreign policy and security analyst based in Ankara. Ömer Özkizilcik's main focus is on Turkish foreign policy and the conflict in Syria. He has extensive studies about the non-state armed groups in Syria and the policies of different stakeholders in Syria. Furthermore, Özkizilcik also publishes research about counter-terrorism and military operations. In addition to publications, he regularly contributes to different media outlets. Ömer Özkizilcik has worked at the security research department of the SETA Foundation in Ankara and the Middle East Foundation in Ankara. He also worked as the editor-in-chief of *Suriye Gündemi*.

***Ferhat Polat*** is a recipient of the prestigious Chevening Scholarship (2021-2022) and an MA candidate in Middle East Studies at the University of Exeter. He is also a Researcher at the TRT World Research Centre, specialising in North African geopolitics and security and focusing on Libyan affairs. Skilled in international relations, policy analysis, governance, and project management, he is regularly invited as a commentator on news channels. He has written a number of essays and articles on geopolitical issues, which have been published in various respected journals, newspapers, and digital outlets.

***Tarek Cherkaoui*** is the manager of the TRT World Research Centre. Dr. Cherkaoui is an expert in the field of strategic communications analysis. He is the author of “The News Media at War: The Clash of Western and Arab Networks in the Middle East” (I.B. Tauris, 2017). Dr Cherkaoui holds a PhD in media and communication from the Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand. His broader research themes include international relations, strategic communications, public diplomacy, and media-military relations—specifically within a Middle Eastern context.

## *Chapter 11*

# **Regional reactions to the Arab Uprisings: Evidence from the Balkans**

*Idlir Lika*

### **Introduction**

The Balkans provide an interesting empirical setting to observe variation in the reaction of regional countries to the Arab Uprisings and to probe the causes behind the variation. As a sub-region within the broader Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), a geographical space that for almost five decades was under authoritarian/totalitarian one-party communist regimes and that only relatively recently transitioned to democracy, Balkan countries should normally be expected to show at least rhetorical support for the revolutionary changes in the Arab world since 2011 and for the democratic aspirations of the Arab people. Indeed, as noted by Mikulova and Berti (2013, p. 4), the Arab Uprisings “opened the door to a vital new target region for Central and Eastern European democracy support.” Moreover, given that all Balkan countries, with the notable exception of Serbia and its client entity within the Bosnian Federation, are firmly Western-oriented [1], one again should have expected Balkan elites to follow the foreign policy line of Brussels and Washington that initially embraced and supported the popular demonstrations and calls for regime change in the Arab world. Yet, the governments in Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia largely ignored the Arab Uprisings and did not articulate an official public stance towards them.

Only Bulgaria and Kosovo did articulate a clear-cut position, went to great lengths to rhetorically support the popular demonstrations, subsequently developed close diplomatic relations with the post-uprising governments in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, and politically supported the armed Syrian opposition against the Assad regime. Why were Bulgaria and Kosovo different from the rest? Relatedly, Bulgaria and Kosovo

themselves differ in a number of important aspects - Bulgaria has a long-established state tradition, is an Orthodox-majority country with a large Muslim/Turkish minority and is both a NATO and EU member, whereas Kosovo is the youngest state in Europe, is a Sunni Muslim-majority country with a significant Orthodox minority, and is neither a NATO nor an EU member – yet both countries showed a similar/comparable level of rhetorical and diplomatic support for the Arab Uprisings. What made Bulgaria and Kosovo similar in this respect?

The chapter proceeds as follows. It first tries to account for the neutral stances towards the uprisings from Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. It then analyzes separately the cases of Bulgaria and Kosovo and explains why they followed a totally different trajectory. The concluding section draws some general points concerning the foreign policy roles of Balkan countries in light of their reactions to the Arab Uprisings.

### **Neutral Stances in the Western Balkans**

By early 2011, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia all shared a crucial background condition that might explain their neutral stances towards the Arab Uprisings. As mass protests forced the hands of the militaries to depose the autocrats in Tunisia and Egypt (January – February 2011) and as the popular uprisings in Libya and Syria quickly descended into brutal civil wars (post-March 2011), all the four aforementioned Balkan countries were either themselves experiencing massive anti-government protests or there was large popular disapproval of incumbent governments, which were being accused of being corrupt and criminal to being outright authoritarian (Bieber 2020). The Arab Uprisings in a sense had reinforced the emergence of a global trend against authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, and the ills of economic globalisation that had started with the anti-austerity demonstrations in several EU members in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis (Voice of America 2011). In that respect, the incumbent elites in Belgrade, Podgorica, Skopje, and Tirana might

have feared the implications of the revolutionary upheavals in the Arab world for the preservations of their own power and that may be the reason why they had a neutral stance towards the uprisings.

Serbia provides perhaps the clearest example to illustrate the argument above. Since 2008, the country had been ruled by a pro-EU coalition government led by the centre-left Democratic Party of Serbia (DP), the same party that ousted Milosevic in October 2000. President Boris Tadic is arguably the most pro-Western president post-Milosevic Serbia has had. Yet, starting from February 5, 2011, a date when the anti-Mubarak uprising in Egypt was in full swing, Belgrade was rocked with massive anti-government protests organised by the Serbian opposition, calling for early parliamentary elections amid a worsening economic crisis in the country (Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty 2011). What is important for the argument here is that the then-Serbian opposition, among other factors, made a clear reference to the popular protests taking place in Egypt to boost their demands. “Elsewhere in the world people are telling governments they should listen to the people”, averred Tomislav Nikolic, leader of the main opposition Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) (AlJazeera 2011). What is somewhat striking is that the SNS elites, who used the protests against authoritarianism in Egypt as an example, were former allies of Slobodan Milosevic during the 1990s, and SNS itself was founded in 2008 after it split from the Serbian Radical Party, the party led by the convicted war criminal Vojislav Seselj.

Eventually, the SNS managed to win both the parliamentary and presidential elections of May 2012 and is currently still in power. However, upon assuming power, the SNS government preserved its largely neutral stance towards events in the Arab world – it did not forge close relations with the post-uprising democratic governments in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, and in the case of the ongoing civil war in Syria, Belgrade steered clear of identifying with any of the warring sides. In a sense, this is somewhat puzzling, since Kosovo, as I am going to elaborate on further below, developed particularly warm relations

with revolutionary forces in the Arab world. Given this, one would have expected Serbia to be closer to the counter-revolutionary forces. However, officially at least, this was not the case. Belgrade's official neutral stance under successive SNS administrations might be explained by the fact that the SNS and President Aleksandar Vucic, unlike the DP and Boris Tadic, followed a much more balanced approach in foreign policy trying to play Russia and the West off against each other (On Serbia's foreign policy under Vucic see Bechev 2017, pp. 51-86). The only clear instances in which Belgrade semi-officially supported one of the counter-revolutionary forces in the Arab world, namely the Assad regime in Syria, were in April 2018 when the Vucic government opposed the U.S.-led strikes against Syria's suspected chemical weapons facilities, strikes that revived memories of the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia (Balkan Insight 2018). Second, and most controversially, in June 2019 an official delegation of the Serbian Orthodox Church paid a visit to Assad in Damascus, praising "the principled and firm support" of the Assad regime in backing Serbia with regard to Kosovo [2] (TRT World 2019). Through this visit, Belgrade semi-officially condoned the Assad regime's (and Russian and Iranian) propagandist discourse that the Syrian civil war is an attempt by foreign/Western-backed terrorists to unseat the legitimate Syrian government (On the Assad regime's official discourse see Gelvin 2015, p. 129). Indeed, Belgrade's official discourse towards Kosovo's independence is almost identical: an illegitimate act of terrorists supported by NATO / the West. Other than these two instances, Serbia's official stance towards events in the Middle East, in general, has been neutrality. As President Vucic himself put it in 2018, "Our policy of military neutrality, which the state of Serbia has established, is [because] we understand our place in the world, we are a small nation, we have to talk to everyone, to have partnerships with everyone" (Balkan Insight 2018).

Turning to the three other Balkan countries which initially also displayed neutrality, developments in Albania, firstly, followed a similar trajectory to those in Serbia. On January 21, 2011, a date when Ben Ali

had already been deposed in Tunisia and protests were about to begin in Egypt, the incumbent centre-right Democratic Party of Prime Minister Sali Berisha was facing massive anti-government protests organised by the opposition Socialist Party of Edi Rama over corruption and fraud scandals. Unlike Serbia, though, here the protests turned violent as three protesters were killed by the police forces (BBC News 2011). Notably, the opposition party led by Rama did not make any reference to the events occurring simultaneously in the Arab world to boost the demands for government change. In brief, fearing the implications of even rhetorically supporting the Arab Uprisings for preserving power, Berisha saw it opportune to simply ignore them. The Berisha government survived for two more years and was eventually unseated following the parliamentary elections of June 2013. The new Rama-led Socialist government then closely followed the Western policy line concerning subsequent developments in the Arab world. For instance, Tirana did not characterise the military dictatorship that overthrew the first elected Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013 as a coup. Likewise, Tirana was quick to throw its rhetorical and moral support behind the U.S. – led strikes against Syria’s suspected chemical weapons facilities in April 2018. “We support our allies and the determination of President Trump for the protection of people’s lives, human rights, and any action which not only punishes barbarous acts but also creates more security and stability all over the world”, averred Albanian President Ilir Meta (Balkan Insight 2018).

Montenegro was also facing anti-government demonstrations by March 2011. The Montenegrin setting was arguably unique, though, as the then incumbent Democratic Party of Socialists led by Milo Djukanovic (the communist successor party) had been ruling uninterruptedly since 1990 and was unseated only very recently following the August 2020 parliamentary elections (Lika 2021, p. 14). Unsurprisingly then, the ruling elite in Podgorica has been almost totally silent concerning the Arab Uprisings. Lastly, in North Macedonia, the opposition Social Democratic Union (SDSM) had been boycotting the parliament from

January to May 2011 (the four critical months during which dramatic events were unfolding in the Arab world) over alleged corruption, criminality and, on top of it all, over a new exclusionary nation-building narrative [3] that the then-incumbent VMRO government of Nikola Gruevski had been implementing since 2008 (Lika 2021, p. 18; Aktürk and Lika 2020, p. 16). The Gruevski regime somehow survived for two subsequent electoral cycles (June 2011 and April 2014) but opposition to his policies, societal polarisation and inter-ethnic tensions in the country only worsened. Similar to the Montenegrin case, the ruling political elites in Skopje were almost totally silent concerning the Arab Uprisings for fear of potential domestic repercussions. Indeed, Erdoğan Saraç, an MP of Turkish descent in the Macedonian parliament from 2011 to 2014, claims that during his mandate the question of the dramatic events occurring in the Arab world was not raised even once in parliament. Saraç also opines that the Gruevski regime's generally friendly relations with Russia might have affected Skopje's neutral stance towards the Arab Uprisings [4].

### **Bulgaria: the EU's Interlocutor with the Arab World**

Diametrically opposed to the stance of the four Western Balkans nations described above, Bulgaria followed a very active and assertive foreign policy towards the Arab Uprisings by not only rhetorically supporting the revolutionary forces, but also by forging particularly close relations with post-uprising democratic governments in Tunisia, Libya, and to a lesser extent Egypt, and by diplomatically supporting the moderate armed Syrian opposition fighting against the Assad regime in Syria. It bears emphasis, though, that this foreign policy activism and assertiveness was strictly channelled through Brussels and Washington. Still, what made Bulgaria different?

To begin with, unlike the political situation in the Western Balkans, by the time popular protests began in Tunisia and quickly spread to Egypt and Libya, Bulgaria was not facing political instability or anti-government protests. On the contrary, since July 2009 Bulgaria was

ruled by the single-party GERB (Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria) government of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov. At the time GERB was a brand new political formation that had been elected on an assertive anti-corruption and rule of law platform (BBC News 2009). Thus, the Arab Uprisings provided a good opportunity for GERB to publicise and boost its pro-democratic agenda externally. Second, and most importantly, Bulgaria had a rich history of relations and economic interactions with several Arab states that during the Cold War had been governed through variants of Arab socialism: Algeria, Egypt (under Nasser), Iraq, Libya, Syria, and (south) Yemen. Indeed, among the former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Bulgaria had arguably the closest relations with the socialist Arab countries, mainly because it was the most obedient Soviet satellite [5], but also due to its geographical proximity to the Mediterranean Arab states. While arms sales were the most prominent aspect of Bulgaria's interactions with the socialist Arab states (Stankova 2013, p. 111), Sofia also admitted a large number of Arab students to universities, institutes, and military schools as part of its policy of "socialist solidarity with the fraternal people" (Zhelyazkova 2004, p. 29). Many of the Arab students remained in Bulgaria and today they constitute the bulk of the estimated 35,000-strong Arab diaspora community (the majority of whom are Syrian) that hold Bulgarian citizenship (Zhelyazkova 2004, p. 10). Once Bulgarian foreign policy shifted entirely from Moscow to Brussels and Washington with the end of the Cold War (Katsikas 2011), Sofia's potential to act as an interlocutor with the Arab world could now be harnessed for the benefit of the EU and the U.S. The Arab Uprisings provided a window of opportunity to harness such potential [6].

In light of the preceding discussion, it is not surprising that in April 2011, the EU sent the then-Bulgarian Foreign Minister Nikolay Mladenov [7] (GERB) as its special envoy to Syria and Yemen to act as a mediator between the regime and opposition forces in the very early stages of the civil wars (Radio Bulgaria 2011). As Mladenov's calls for an immediate stop to violence and for a negotiated solution

to the crises came to nothing, Western-backed Bulgaria shifted course. One month later, in May 2011, Mladenov spearheaded the founding of “Sofia Platform” [8], a high-level policy forum holding regular meetings with revolutionary leaders across the Arab world, with the attendance of several EU Foreign Ministers and UN Secretary-General Ban-ki Moon, that aimed to discuss and promote regime transitions in the Arab world based on the experience of Central and Eastern European democracies (Bechev 2013a, p. 202). For instance, for the post-uprising transitions in Tunisia and Egypt, Mladenov highly publicized and recommended Bulgaria’s model of “roundtable” talks [9] whereby the incumbent communist party and the anti-communist opposition in 1990 had succeeded in containing the escalating inter-ethnic tensions and in paving the way for a smooth political transition (Brookings Institution 2013). The founding of the “Sofia Platform” denoted that Bulgaria had moved past expressions of mere rhetorical and moral support for Arab revolutionaries to provide concrete institutional support. In that respect, Mladenov’s rhetoric during the February 2011 demonstrations in Cairo’s Tahrir Square urging Europe to “support Egypt on the road to reforms and change in the name of a greater participation of society” became somehow institutionally grounded with the “Sofia Platform” (Mikulova and Berti 2013, p. 9).

Subsequently, in February 2012, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov became the first EU head of government to visit Tunisia following the ousting of Ben Ali in January 2011, even offering technical assistance to Tunisia in its efforts to draft a new constitution (Novinite 2012). In Tunis, Borisov also opened the “Tunisian School of Government”, a civic organisation in the area of political education for democratic transitions, and appointed Zhelju Zhelev as Bulgaria’s special envoy [10]. Sofia’s outreach to post-uprising Tunisia was followed by the official visits of Mladenov to both Cairo and Tripoli, where he reiterated Bulgaria’s and the EU’s support for the popularly elected governments [11].

Yet, Bulgaria's most assertive, and perhaps also most controversial, role during the Arab Uprisings were in the support given to the moderate armed Syrian opposition in its fight against the Assad regime. In this respect, in late May 2012, in the wake of the Houla massacre, Mladenov hosted in Sofia a meeting of different armed opposition groups affiliated with the moderate Free Syrian Army (FSA), with the aim of improving coordination between them as well as to urge the international community to take "a more active intervention for ending violence" (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee 2012). The explanation Mladenov gave for organising the meeting deserves emphasis:

We cannot continue to stand idle and see these massacres continue. All those who have been involved must understand that they will be prosecuted and judged for their deeds [...] It [Bulgaria] has a strong connection to the people in Syria. Bulgarians and Syrians have lived and studied together for many years, many of them studied in each other's countries, we have a long history of cooperation. We also want to provide not just support to those who want to build a new free and democratic Syria, but also to share the experience which we have from our own transition, the challenges that we have faced here so that we can help our friends move forward. (Deutsche Welle 2012b)

What is less known is that such meetings were convened also to coordinate the CIA's and Gulf countries' covert programme of supplying weapons to armed opposition groups in Syria. Bulgaria played a critical role in this organisation due to its enormous Soviet-style weapons industry and due to its geographical proximity to Syria. Recent investigative reports by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), a network of local NGOs, has revealed that from 2012 to 2015, the United States, United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Saudi Arabia bought more than € 400 million worth of Soviet-style weapons and ammunitions from Bulgaria

“for use by local forces they support in the war in Syria, and possibly also the conflict in Yemen” (Petkova 2015). The same reports reveal also that in addition to Bulgaria, Bosnia, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Romania (all former communist countries) sold large quantities of weapons to be used in war-torn Syria – a lucrative arms trade estimated altogether to be worth € 1.2 billion (The Guardian 2016; Deutsche Welle 2016; Balkan Insight 2016). Needless to say, such an enormous weapons supply programme was in breach of the arms embargo that the EU had imposed on Syria from May 2011 to May 2013. Through this programme, Bulgaria essentially resumed its old lucrative arms business with Middle Eastern states.

When on July 18, 2012, a suicide bomber killed seven people on a bus transporting Israeli tourists outside the Burgas Airport in Bulgaria [12], the incumbent GERB government and especially Foreign Minister Mladenov came under heavy fire domestically by the opposition Socialist Party (BSP) and by the far-right, xenophobic Ataka party on the grounds that Bulgaria’s heavy involvement in the Middle East had turned the country into a target of international terrorism (Bechev 2013b). Although not expressed openly, the Russian-friendly BSP was not happy with the support the government was giving the anti-Assad armed factions in Syria [13]. It would be inaccurate, though, to conclude from all that was said that Bulgaria, for all its activism, was following an independent and ambitious policy towards the Arab Uprisings. As already stated at the beginning of this section, Bulgaria’s activism and assertiveness were strictly channelled through Brussels and Washington. Sofia never followed a foreign policy line that contradicted that of its two geopolitical allies. Two additional examples prove this point. First, for all its heavy pro-democracy rhetoric during the Arab Uprisings, Bulgaria refrained from labelling the military dictatorship that overthrew Morsi in July 2013 as a coup [14], subscribing instead to the view held in Brussels and Washington that the alleged illiberalism of President Morsi was a greater evil than the military dictatorship that replaced him (for the U.S. reaction to the coup in Egypt in comparative

perspective see Yegin 2016, pp. 413-4). Since then, Sofia has had normal diplomatic and economic relations with the al-Sisi regime. Second, once the Obama Administration ended the covert weapon supply programme to the FSA in 2014 (alleging that the weapons were falling into the hands of the extremist groups) and ruled out regime change as the U.S. goal in Syria in favour of supporting the Kurdish PYD / YPG in the fight against ISIS (Gelvin 2015, p. 143), Bulgaria also scaled back its pro-opposition rhetoric and its arms sales to the Middle East were substantially reduced. In brief, Sofia was mostly a follower during the Arab Uprisings, and its potential to act as an interlocutor with the Arab world was harnessed by both the EU and the U.S.

### **Kosovo: The Assertive Newborn**

Kosovo's foreign policy role during the Arab Uprisings was very similar to that of Bulgaria and diametrically opposed to that of its Western Balkans neighbours. Kosovo was quick to throw its rhetorical support behind the popular protests in the Arab countries, forged close diplomatic relations with the post-uprising elected governments in Egypt and Libya, politically supported the armed Syrian opposition and called for Western military intervention to overthrow the Assad regime. At first sight, such foreign policy activism might appear puzzling for a nation which was the newest and poorest in Europe - having declared independence from Serbia only three years before the Arab Uprisings began - was neither a NATO nor an EU member, and unlike Bulgaria, had no history of interactions with Arab states. However, it was precisely Kosovo's recent experience of having waged a revolutionary war against the dictatorship of Slobodan Milosevic and Kosovo's need for external recognition of its independence that pushed the country to undertake such an active foreign policy towards the Arab Uprisings. As in the Bulgarian case, though, such activism strictly followed the line of the U.S., Kosovo's main geopolitical ally and the most powerful promoter of Kosovo's independence internationally.

Unlike its neighbours who were all experiencing political instability and massive anti-government protests, Kosovo had just elected a new government when the Arab Uprisings began in January 2011. The new coalition government led by the centre-right Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) of Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi (a former Kosovo Liberation Army commander) was somehow similar to GERB in Bulgaria in having been elected on an anti-corruption and rule of law platform. Similar to GERB again, the Thaçi government was quick to voice its support for the popular uprisings that began in the Arab world. The greatest diplomatic asset Kosovo had in this respect was that it drew parallels between the struggle of Arab people against authoritarianism and its own recent armed struggle against Milosevic's dictatorship in Serbia. As the then-Kosovo Foreign Minister Enver Hoxhaj [15] explicitly stated: "We were among the first governments in Europe who were supporting the opposition in Libya and in other Arab countries last year because we were fighting for the same aspirations, for the same values" (Reuters 2012). The ruling elite in Pristina strongly supported the UN Security Council-authorized NATO military intervention against Qaddafi in Libya (March 2011) and by April 2012, Foreign Minister Hoxhaj received a delegation from the moderate Syrian armed opposition in Pristina (Radio Evropa e Lire 2012). While Hoxhaj reiterated Kosovo's strong political support for the "re-building of a democratic Syria", opposition representatives promised that once the Assad regime was overthrown, Syria's recognition of the independence of Kosovo would be a priority for the new democratic regime (Radio Evropa e Lire 2012).

All this evoked a strong response from Russia, whose UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin warned the Security Council that Kosovo was becoming a "training centre for rebels", allegations that Hoxhaj dismissed (Deutsche Welle 2012a). Kosovo's political support for the Syrian opposition reached its peak with an article minister Hoxhaj published in *Foreign Policy* in August 2013, in the wake of the horrendous chemical attack by regime forces in Ghouta, where he called for Western military

intervention to overthrow the Assad regime just as NATO had bombed Serbia in 1999. In this article carefully titled “It’s 1999 in Syria”, Enver Hoxhaj (2013) argued:

The U.N. Security Council has stood idly by as more than 100,000 people have perished in Syria since 2011. Kosovars know all too well the cost in human lives brought by such a wait-and-see approach [...] The NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999 serves as a model for our allies in the West and the Arab world to end Syrian suffering. The intervention in Kosovo also affirmed that, even without the mandate of the U.N. Security Council, countries should act to prevent regimes from abusing human rights ... My country, though small and young, is poised to help in the days and years after Assad’s regime falls. We can use our recent and successful experience building our own state to help the Syrians rebuild theirs. That is what Kosovo can offer [...] Syrians deserve to live in a peaceful and democratic Syria. My country is ready to help, but first, we need the international community to do what they did for us 14 years ago — mobilise political will and military might to bring down the regime of a brutal thug.

As in the Bulgarian case, though, all this heavy rhetoric and moral support did not serve much since Kosovo eventually scaled back its support when the official policy of Washington towards Syria changed in 2014. The same pattern was also observed in the particularly warm relations Pristina initially forged with the short-lived Morsi government in Egypt. To be sure, Kosovo had one major goal in its outreach to the post-uprising elected governments in the Arab world: recognition of its independence. It is very significant to point out that *before* the Arab Uprisings began in January 2011, *none* of the Mediterranean Sunni-majority Arab states (Syria, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and

Morocco) had recognized the independence of Sunni-majority Kosovo. By contrast, all the Gulf Arab states, with the exception of Iraq and Yemen, had recognized Kosovo [16]. The non-recognition from Hosni Mubarak's Egypt and Ali Abdullah Saleh's Yemen (also from Qaddafi's Libya to a lesser extent) is particularly puzzling and it contradicts recent findings in the literature (Siroky et al. 2020) because they were staunch regional allies of the U.S. It was only, very significantly, *after* the autocrats were overthrown in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen that each of the post-uprising governments in these countries recognized Kosovo [17]. Among the countries that underwent transition during the Arab Uprisings, only Tunisia did not (and still does not) recognize Kosovo's independence.

The case of Egypt is particularly instructive. As already stated, Pristina initially forged warm relations with the Muslim Brotherhood government led by Morsi. Kosovo's Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi on February 6, 2013, even paid an official visit to President Morsi in Cairo, pleading for Egypt's recognition of Kosovo (The Prime Minister Office 2013). Four months after this meeting, the Morsi government did recognize Kosovo on June 27, 2013, however, only six days later (July 3, 2013) Morsi was overthrown in a bloody military coup. The al-Sisi regime did not revoke the recognition of Kosovo's independence and the ruling elite in Pristina, closely following Washington's line, refrained from labelling the overthrow of Morsi as a coup and eventually established normal diplomatic relations with the new military regime in Cairo. In brief, during the Arab Uprisings, Kosovo, even more than Bulgaria, was a classic follower in foreign policy despite all the activism it showed.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter analysed the different reactions that the Arab Uprisings evoked in the Balkan countries. It empirically showed how political instability and massive anti-government protests in Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia during the same time that the Uprisings were taking place led the ruling elites in these countries to

adopt a neutral stance towards the events in the Arab world. Bulgaria and Kosovo, by contrast, followed a completely different course by actively supporting the democratic aspirations of the Arab people, by forging close relations with post-uprising governments in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, and by diplomatically supporting the armed Syrian opposition. Bulgaria took advantage of its past close relations with the Arab world and its geographical proximity to the region to act as an interlocutor for the EU and the U.S. Kosovo's activism, on the other hand, was driven by its own recent experience of having waged a revolutionary war against a dictatorship and mainly by the need for external recognition of its independence. Pristina was hoping that pluralist, democratic Arab regimes would be more likely to recognize the independence of a fellow Sunni Muslim country, and the post-uprising developments in Egypt, Libya and Yemen proved this point. For all the pro-democracy rhetoric and activism of Bulgaria and Kosovo, however, this chapter showed that it was activism taking place within the strict limits imposed by the EU and the U.S. foreign policy positions. Bulgaria, and certainly Kosovo more so, do not have the resources to back up a foreign policy independent of their geopolitical allies (regarding the Bulgarian case, see Bechev 2013a, p. 190). While it has been shown elsewhere that the EU and the U.S. often face limits in influencing domestic outcomes in the Balkans (Aktürk and Lika 2020; Lika 2021), when it comes to foreign policy Balkan countries are mostly classic followers.

## Endnotes

[1] All Balkan countries, with the exception of Bosnia, Kosovo, and Serbia, are NATO members, and all of them, with the exception of Bosnia and Kosovo, have the status of EU candidate country. Bulgaria has been an EU member country since 2007.

[2] Needless to say, the Assad regime's non-recognition of Kosovo is anything but principled. Assad is merely following the foreign policy line of its external patron, Russia. The regime's non-recognition of Kosovo but its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia's

two breakaway provinces, at the same time proves this point beyond any doubt.

[3] According to this new narrative, contemporary Macedonians are descendants of ancient Macedonians, thus they have non-Slavic roots. By contrast, SDSM holds the view that contemporary Macedonians are a distinct South Slavic people.

[4] Online interview (via WhatsApp) with Erdoğan Saraç, 9 June 2021.

[5] Indeed, during the Cold War Bulgaria was informally labelled as the Soviet Union's "sixteenth republic" (Grashkin 2020).

[6] Online interview (via Google meet) with Hayri Emin, Foreign relations expert at the Bulgarian Office of Grand Mufti in Sofia. 10 June 2021.

[7] Nikolay Mladenov, who is of half-Jewish-descent, is arguably the most heavyweight Foreign Minister post-communist Bulgaria has had. Before he became Foreign Minister in 2010, Mladenov had extensive past experience as an NGO official in a number of Arab countries and for one year served as Bulgarian Minister of Defence (2009-2010). After he left the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry in 2013, Mladenov was appointed as Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Iraq (2013-2015), then as UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the UN Secretary-General to the Palestinian Authority (2015 – 2020).

[8] Detailed information on the platform can be reached through its official website <http://sofiaplatform.org/>

[9] For more on the Bulgarian "roundtable" talks, see Aktürk and Lika (2020, pp. 13-14).

[10] Zhelev was "a francophone ex-dissident philosopher" and the first popularly elected president in post-communist Bulgaria (Bechev 2013a, p. 202).

[11] Online interview with Hayri Emin

[12] On February 5, 2013, Bulgarian authorities officially accused

Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia militia-cum-political party, of having perpetrated the terrorist attack (Bechev 2013b).

[13] Unsurprisingly in this respect, the Arab diaspora community in Bulgaria (most of whom are supporters / sympathetic to the Assad regime) has traditionally voted heavily for BSP and Ataka (Online interview with Hayri Emin).

[14] Online interview with Hayri Emin.

[15] Not to be confused with the name of the Albanian communist dictator Enver Hoxha. The spelling of both names is the same with the exception of the last letter “j” that the Kosovo Foreign Minister’s last name has in addition.

[16] See the official website <https://www.kosovothanksyou.com/>

[17] The first was Yemen which recognized Kosovo on June 12, 2013, then Egypt followed suit on June 27, 2013, while the Tripoli government recognized Kosovo on September 25, 2013 (<https://www.kosovothanksyou.com/>)

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The Arab Spring is not a development limited to one ethno-national, geographic, or linguistic space, but rather a global and world-historical phenomenon both in its origins and its outcomes. The twelve authors who contributed to this volume, hailing from five countries on three continents with very diverse backgrounds and experiences, provide empirically rich and theoretically sophisticated analyses of the Arab Spring in its first decade from different viewpoints. Although the patterns they observe and the predictions they express may indeed be rather different, they share the belief that the Arab Spring is far from over, with its first decade only a prelude to other major developments to come. Looking at the past, present, and equally importantly, the future, of the Arab Spring, this edited volume provides reasons for cautious optimism despite broken promises, betrayals, mass suffering, and international apathy and complicity. Just as the catastrophic destruction of the Second World War gave birth to the most impressive scheme of regional integration in Europe, which finds its institutional embodiment in the European Union, one hopes that the current doom and gloom in the aftermath of the first Arab Spring will motivate and enable similar if not even more robust forms of peaceful cooperation, prosperity, and reconstruction in the region. This volume offers new conceptual and explanatory tools and diverse viewpoints for readers around the world who struggle to make sense of one of the most important epochal development of our times.