

THE INVOLVEMENT OF CITIZENS IN THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ECONOMICAL CRISIS

Adrian-Lucian Kanovici^[1]

Summary

The economical and financial crisis that broke out in the United States of America and that rapidly extended at international level, has affected, in the context of a globalized world, both solid economies from the Centre and Western Europe and the more fragile economies that are still in transition from the space of South-Eastern Europe and especially the Western Balkans. The lack of an effective involvement of the citizens from the Balkans in the decision making process at local and central level has represented, for the last 20 years, one of the important causes that allowed the level of the reforms carried out in this state to be an incipient one. As a consequence, in the present time, against some alarming economical realities and some economical indicators that show an increase of the number of unemployed people, it becomes necessary to have a drastic reduction of foreign investments or an increase of the public debt level as a percentage from the domestic gross product and an involvement of the citizens and of the specialists from various areas in the drafting and the implementation of public policies.

Key words: *public policies, human geography, Western Balkans, economical crisis*

Introduction

In a decade when the economical problems have caused the greatest debates within the national and European decisional capacities, the role of the citizens in the decision-making process gains an increased importance. If, within the consolidated democracies from Central and Western Europe, the active involvement of the citizen in the public life

^[1] University tutor post-graduate within the Department of Tourism and Geography, the Faculty of Commerce, the Academy of Economical Studies from Bucharest. Bucharest. e-mail: adrian_ase_rei@yahoo.com.

represents a tradition and a cornerstone for the operation of these states, in the societies from South-Eastern Europe, the involvement of citizens in the public life is a very reduced one, many times limited to the day when they express their political choice through voting. To know the rights and the ways through which citizens can make accountable the people they have elected so they can act according to the public interest, still represents a necessity. The consolidation of participative democracy supposes the existence of a permanent and sustained dialogue between the citizen and his elected person, not only during the period time before elections, but also during the whole period of his job, the citizen being actively involved in the decision making process through a permanent consultation. Also, another problem that is frequently encountered in the South-European states is caused by the weak consultation of specialists and in this article we shall refer to the ones that are coming from the area of social geography and human geography, as a whole, when the political deciders implement measures meant to improve the quality of life, both in the urban and the rural environment.

Of course, the causes that represent the base of this rupture between the decisional factors at local, regional and national level and the rest of the population are diversified and strongly influenced by a series of socio-economical, cultural or historical elements. The lack of an efficient communication, in both directions, can cause, in times of economical and financial difficulties, social tensions that may escalate and may develop in violent manifestations towards the authorities (the example of Greece, but not only, is a standard in this sense), but also in a powerful rise in the eyes of the electorate of the nationalist, extremist or populist parties. The marginalization of the citizen's opinion may cause and feed both an attitude of not getting involved in the public life and getting closer to the radical views that promise radical changes in the system and rapid improvements of the living conditions, although, in most cases, this type of promises are, obviously, not achievable.

This type of manifestations are encouraged by the fact that the current economical and financial crisis that the whole world is going through is a crisis that affects also other essential areas, overlapping with another social and political crisis where the trust of the citizens

regarding the operation of participative democracies, and especially regarding the availability of the political class to represent the interest of the citizens and its capacity to professionally and competently manage the systemic problems, is seriously tested.

1. The role of geography in formulating and implementing public policies

The connections between geography, especially human and economical geography, and the area of public policies is widely recognized and, at the same time, well shaped. This is because geographers are the ones that most of the time bring into attention the spatial and environmental dimensions and perspectives, which are in most cases neglected by the researchers that work in the field of public administration science, and implicitly, in the field of drafting and implementing public policies.

Therefore, the researchers from the field of geography are the ones who can participate in the drafting of public policies, bringing their contribution to the different phases of this process (as from the identification of some real issues to the impact analysis of various applied policies). Also, there is a great diversity of geographical studies that may influence the governmental, regional or local factors in taking certain decisions that could have effects on the economical and social evolution in certain areas.

Despite the fact that the studies and the geographical analysis that serve to draft and implement public policies have become more numerous in the last twenty years, in the Central and Eastern European area, the influence of geographers on the public policies decisions remains a quite small one in relation with the existent potential.

In order to understand in a more clear way, at what extent the geographical studies and analysis can serve as the base of public policies, we should understand what do these policies represent as a whole, which are the mechanisms that underlie them, and which are the phases and the elements that form them.

We can start our analysis with the fact that "*the field of public policies (research and analysis in this area) may be defined very well as taking*

care of the study of the political and administrative decisions that allocate various forms of resources (material, financial, know how, symbolical). The public policies, the study object of the subject in question, represent the actions made by the Government (central or local) as a response to the problems that come from the society". (Lambru 2006, p. 4) Therefore, we can take into consideration the fact that we are discussing public policies when a public authority, central or local, tries, with the aid of a coordinated action programme, to modify the economical, social, cultural environment of the social players.

The analysis or the study of policies represents a quite recent concern (although, governmental systems are facing problems regarding the implementations of policies for a long time); its origins are found in the period following the Second World War, but gaining an even greater range in the last thirty years. We can say that exist at least two sources that have contributed in de decisive way to the occurrence and the evolution of this area for policy analysis:

- on one hand, the continuous increasing diversity of the problems that, the central power, meaning the Government, has been facing in different states. The development of the public sector, to which is added the increasing complexity of problems, made it necessary to use certain techniques and abilities that suppose a specialized understanding when drafting and implementing public policies.

- on the other hand, the fact that researchers have diversified a lot their area of research, especially if we take into consideration the members of the university research centers, for the study of public policies: in the case of many researchers from the area of administrative and political sciences, the idea of applying a series of theories drafted with the hope to resolve social problems – not only the economical ones- has motivated a lot their attempt to identify the link between science and the process of government, between the theoretical side for knowing some methods and solutions that resolve the identified problems and putting these into practice. Certainly, this process was not an easy one, the study of public policies did not know a strong boom, but we can rather talk of a constant advance of the researches made in this field.

Many times, it was observed that the lack of some geographical analysis that emphasize the issues linked to the economical, social and cultural environment in a certain habitat has been the basis for some public political policies implemented by the central and local decision factors, but afterwards these public policies proved out to be inefficient and incapable to meet the needs of the community to whom they were addressing to.

The most important link that lies at the base of the complex connections between the two academic fields, of economical and human geography and the one of public policies as a discipline of administrative sciences is represented by the multidisciplinary character of the both.

We can say that the field of public policies research represents a border area between various traditional disciplines, where there is an overlap of: political sciences, social psychology, juridical, economical sciences or sociology. In the same time, the study of public policies could be considered as being the newest discipline within political and administrative science, disciplines that have a strong inter-disciplinary character. Currently, the drafting of public policies has in view to support the development of the increasingly number of human communities around the world, this fact becoming a real priority. Also, public policies represent sets of tools whose purpose became to improve the living conditions in the disadvantaged areas or in those inhabited by human communities that are disadvantaged from different point of views. As a consequence, the decision factors in this field of activity have become more and more diverse.

Despite an evolution regarding the involvement of geographers in the public policies research activity, their involvement in the process of identifying the issues and of drafting concrete measures that bring applicable solutions it is of little visibility. This fact is observed, and many times criticized, in the specialized literature: *“The link between political geography and public policy is direct and substantive but not well developed in the field of geography. The lack of a full understanding of the mutual determinative relationship undermines the efficiency and the effectiveness of a public policy. However, with few exceptions, policy*

analysis as an element of political geography has been missing both from case studies and from comparative research.” (Bailly, Gibson 2004, p. 78)

The lack of a geographical analysis with substance can make some of the socio-economical disparities or some community needs from certain areas impossible to be perceived at their real intensity, fact that can reflect afterwards in a series of public measures, taken by the decision makers, and that do not have an efficient impact on the target group to whom they address.

It is also true, that in some situations, hazard makes geographical research not useful for a set of measures that prevent the negative impact of some natural phenomena on human communities (for example, the draft of some public policies that offer security to the population from some habitats, in case of earthquake or extreme meteorological phenomena, is almost impossible to make in the light of the unpredictable character of this phenomena).

On the other hand, there are many aspects of the social and economical life that are not enough exploited by the relationship between the geographical research environment and the administrative studies environment. For example, we can mention:

- problems related to territorial pacification;
- problems related to the development of infrastructure and especially transportation means and routes;
- problems related to medical geography and the vulnerability of some social groups when facing various categories of viruses;
- problems related to environmental risks, that occur following the way in which industry is localized in relation with the main residential areas, especially in the urban areas;
- problems related to the access to education of certain social groups, but also their integration degree;
- problems related to the occurrence of social phenomena such as poverty or the high level of unemployment;
- problems related to the access to some basic services (for example energy or drinking water supply).

It is obvious that the social, economical and environmental problems where geographers should get more involved (when we talk about the attempts of society to resolve these matters through public policies) are

much more diversified. As a completion, we have the following statement:

“Other geographers have contributed to the growing research on environmental problems and their causes and politics – whether this be urban transport problems, pollution, the health and environmental effects of nuclear power production and waste disposal sites, the protection of key ecological sites, energy conservation, water quality and supply, international pollution spillovers, local aspects of global warming, and so on. In many cases, from the analysis of the geographies of crime to air pollution studies, GIS and related techniques have proved useful where large data sets have been involved.” (Martin 2001, p. 193)

Despite this fact, the role of the geographer continues to remain small in comparison with other factors involved, among which we have to mention: the NGOs as the main trainers for public policies, the group of interests from various economical fields of activity, the local and central administration, the political parties and last but not least, the media.

But, in order for a public policy to really prove its efficiency, a series of elements and aspects must be taken into consideration, among which we must mention the following:

- public policies are formed of a set of concrete measures and decisions, that give seriousness to a public policy;
- public policies contain sets of decisions or various forms to redistribute resources, whose nature is more or less authoritarian and where coercion is always present;
- public policies are not isolated measures, but on the contrary, they are part of a “general action framework”, which allows us to distinguish between a coordinated public policy and simple isolated decisions;
- public policies have a “target”, which means a group of individuals whose situation is directly affected by the respective public policies;
- public policies have objectives and goals, set out depending on a series of norms and values of the respective society.

With regards to the defining and establishing of the “target” or of the target group, researchers from the field of geography should be more involved than they currently are, because through the specific metho-

dology for this area of activity, they are capable of picking up the essential information on the characteristics of the population within a certain habitat. Also, alongside with establishing the target groups, geographers are capable of correctly identifying habitats where there are certain environmental phenomena that require an intervention of the competent authorities (in the vicinity of industrial areas there can be accurately localized environmental problems caused by the industrial processes that take place in that area, and also the way and the intensity in which the human communities located in their proximity can be affected by them).

Likewise, public policies are focusing more and more lately on the attempt to reduce, and where is possible even to eliminate the major socio-economical discrepancies occurred either within areas or between contiguous areas.

Considering the fact that the world we live in tends to be more and more globalized, that the connections from all the areas regarding socio-economical aspects tend to become more and more powerful, also the issues that mankind is facing start to diversify and become heavier. That is why, although currently the academic environment and the researchers from the area of geography are not consulted and do not succeed to make their point of view heard in many of the matters that should fall into their competency area, it is expected, in the years that follow, that the public policies trainers and the main decision factors for their implementation (political factors at local and central level) shall focus and pay more attention to the analysis and the studies of geographies.

At the same time, it is just as true that the geography research area must try to keep up with the quite rapid pace in which occur and grow some new and more complex challenges that threaten the stability and the normal function of the relationship that lie at the basis of human society as a whole.

Hereinafter we shall try to approach the connection between the involvement of the citizens in the decision making process and the evolution of the economical and financial crisis that is present in the South-Eastern European space (especially the Balkans area), and mostly after the year 2008. This economical and financial crisis that

overlaps a social and political crisis (generated, on one hand, by the increasingly mistrust of citizens in the state institutions, and on the other hand by the severe lack of interest of the youth regarding the political events) has serious implications of geo-political and geo-economical kind, that can affect also our country. An increased attention, in this part of the analysis, shall be paid to the states from the Western Balkans, a permanent hotbed of political, economical and social instability, with a potential to destabilize the whole region.

2. Geo-economical and geopolitical evolutions in the Balkans

Before the break out of the economical and financial crisis, the South-Eastern European states were recording high levels of economical growth. As the crisis started to extend through the entire Europe, the economies of the states from South-Eastern Europe started to feel its effects more and more, being necessary to receive international financial assistance that was offered in the exchange of some promises regarding ample reforms.

Although the economical crisis seems far to be over, the developed countries are trying to fix their economical recovery mechanisms. That is why, it is expected that the small economies from the Balkans, almost entirely dependent on the international evolutions, shall improve.

The Western Balkans represents a geopolitical concept that is very clearly separated from a geographical point of view. Unlike other geopolitical terms, such as South-Eastern Europe or the Balkans, the notion Western Balkans is relatively recent, after the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia, in the first part of the years 1990. In the same time we must observe the fact that this concept is among the few concepts from the Balkan area that was institutionalized by a territorial separation and a concrete definition given by the Euro-Atlantic structures (European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization).

The concept *Western Balkans* is used by the European Union institutions (the European Parliament, the European Commission and the European Council) and by the 27 member states, under the umbrella of this name being included all the states from the Balkan

Peninsula, enclaved by the European Union. Likewise, this term is used by the United States of America and by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization for defining the same geographical area. (Bugajski 2010, p. 8) Practically, we are talking about the states resulted from the disintegration of Yugoslavia (Slovenia was excluded following its membership to the EU space since the year 2004) to which we add Albania. These were surrounded from a geographical point of view, by the European organization after, Bulgaria and Romania have become member states, in the year 2007, and have ensured the territorial continuity of the European Union by connecting Greece with the rest of the member states from Central and Western Europe.

The term started to be more and more used as European Union has redefined their strategy regarding this space, its stated final goal being to include all political formations from the Western Balkans in the European Union. In fact, European Union, as the entire international community is strongly involved in the peace making and settling process of this space recognized for its political instability, an instability that left its mark also on the economical development of this space.

Therefore, on the territory of the Western Balkans we meet 6 sovereign independent states (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Republic of Macedonia and Albania) to which we add Kosovo (a country recognized so far by only 98 member states of the United Nations Organization, following the unilateral declaration of independence towards Serbia, announced at the beginning of the year 2008).

In the context of the economical and financial world crisis, the economies of the Western Balkans remain extremely fragile and vulnerable, given the fact that they do not have an easy access to external financing or to the financial mechanisms that ensure the stability, as it is the case of the center and western part of the European continent.

From the geopolitical and geo-economical point of view, the next causal chain could produce the most important negative effects following the lack of involvement of citizens in the drafting and implementation process of public policies: if the economical crisis continues to show its effects, the states from the Balkans have a reduced range of tools for reacting, which may cause social disturbances (Greece is the

best example in this sense, but we must take account of the fact that also in other Balkan states, such as Macedonia or Serbia there were large street protests against the austerity measures taken by the national government under the pressure of the international organizations).

Social disturbances can be very easily exploited by the extremist or populist parties that may instigate to inter-ethnic tensions. The fact that in Greece, following some elections with repetition, a neo-Nazis party penetrated the Parliament, and in Serbia one of the most known nationalist leaders has won the presidential elections, and his party came to govern, represent two examples that show the powerful connection between the economical crisis and the rise to power of the nationalist projects.

In a larger European context, the economical and financial crisis has at least three negative effects on the Balkans:

- ✓ in their attempt to fight against the effects of the crisis, most of the governments from the Balkans shall redirect their resources and attention towards this goal and against the implementation of the reforms necessary for the integration process;

- ✓ European Union shall tend to prevent the integration of new members with weak economies that shall not be able to respect the new economical and financial policies (that the European Union currently builds) and to keep up with the developed countries;

- ✓ preoccupied with the economical problems, the European Union states shall pay less attention to the enlargement process, therefore decreasing the chances of the new candidates to become members with full rights in a period of time as short as possible.

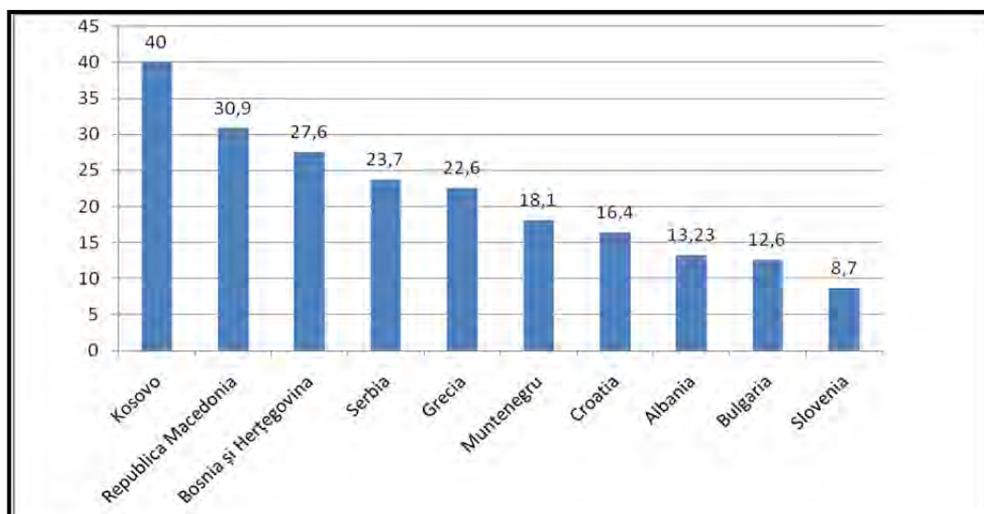
The route of the Balkan states, from an economical point of view is similar with the European one. But we notice a delay in the manner in which the effects of the crisis are expressed in relation with the member states of the European Union. Therefore, while for Western Europe, the year 2008 was the most difficult one from an economical point of view, the most difficult year for the Balkan states was 2009. Against a comeback of the European economies we may expect also a comeback of the Balkan economies.

The rate of unemployment, a very high one especially in the Western Balkans, has increased even more during the crisis period. Therefore

unemployment represents a real challenge, especially since the creation of new working places during the following period of time shall be a slow and difficult process. High unemployment may cause social tensions, may lead to an increase of the crime phenomena and may grow the magnitude of subterranean economy; all these together with an increasingly greater pressure on the public budgets.

Also, the deliveries received from the citizens abroad are in a continuous decrease at the level of all the states in the Balkans, fact that represents a real problem because of they were an important segment of the gross domestic product. A solution to remedy this situation may be represented only by the economical comeback of the host states. In contrary case, a possible comeback of the Balkan citizens from the Central and Western European states may represent an extra pressure on the national budgets.

Picture 1. Level of unemployment in the Balkan states^[1] (in percentage)



Although the largest part of the Balkan states do not record high levels of public debts (Greece is the only exception in this sense), it is necessary to have a cautious politics for spending public money and

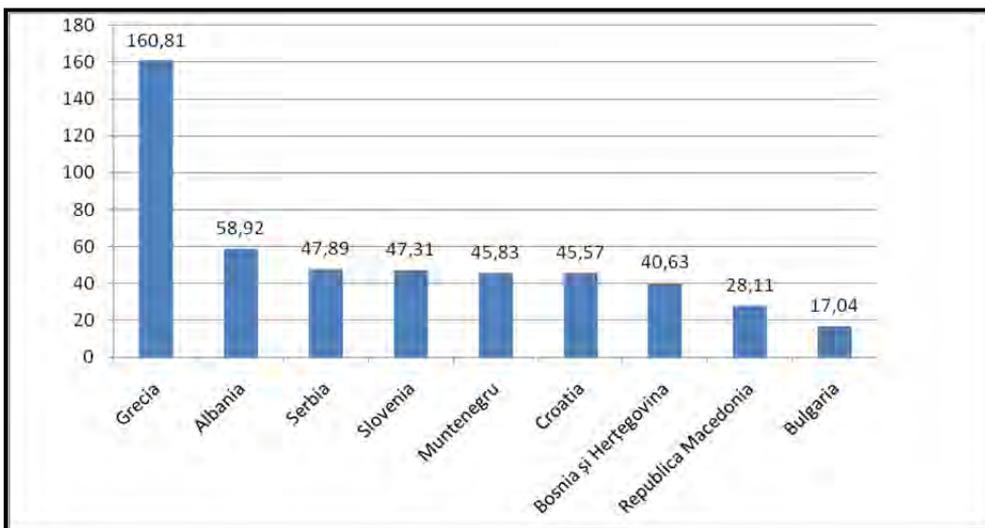
^[1] Data for the year 2011. For the case of Croatia and Slovenia, the data belong to Eurostat. For the other states, the data come from the National Institutes of Statistics of each particular state.

indebtedness so that the situation does not get out of control and to demonstrate to the European Union the maturity of these economies and the capacity of the governments to wisely manage the resources.

Regarding the exports to the member states of the European Union, the main partners of the Balkan states are Italy and Germany, a smaller part having also Austria, France or Spain. If we refer to the trade with the states outside the European Union, we can notice intense commercial exchanges between the states of the former Yugoslavia, to which we add Albania.

From the point of view of the gross domestic product, the period 2005-2007 was marked by a strong growth (in average 6-7 percentages), a growth that is considered normal in relation with the global economical evolution. The afterwards evolution of the GDPs from the Balkan states was marked by the strong decrease of this indicator following the general tendencies of the European states, the most affected being Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Bulgaria.

Picture 2. *Level of public debt as percentage from GDP in the Balkan states^[1]*



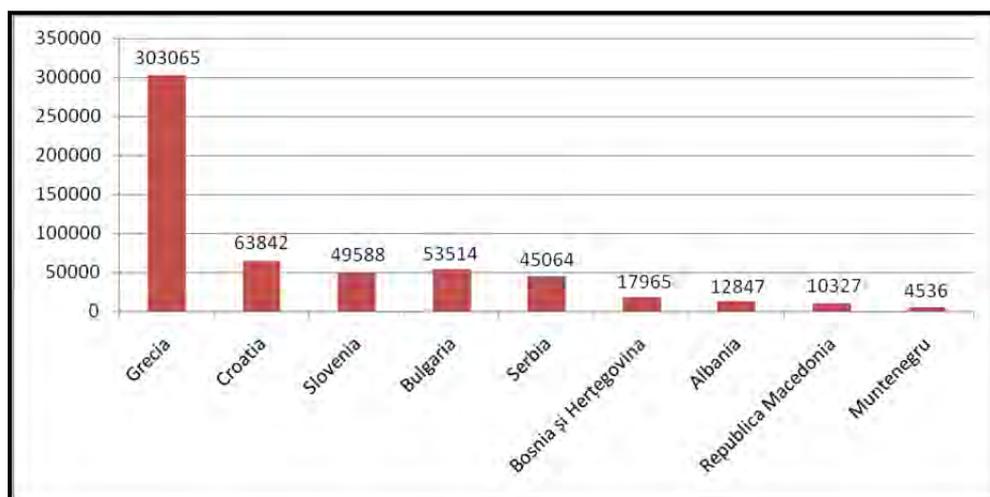
The years 2010 and 2011 have marked a stabilization of the gross domestic product level in most of the Balkan states, and there are

^[1] Data for the year 2011. Source: The International Monetary Fund.

perspectives that the situation of this indicator to improve in the next year against the internal austerity measures and following an economical comeback of the main commercial partners.

The growth of the gross domestic product is very important but there are a series of other economical indicators whose contributions are critical when we consider the political and the social implications of the economical situation. But, for citizens, the growth of the gross domestic product does not value too much if it is not accompanied by an increase of the living conditions and by the creation of new working places. The fact that the Western Balkan states were facing a high level of unemployment before the break out of the economical crisis makes their situation even more alarming in the current times.

Picture 3. *The nominal value of the GDP in the Balkan states- 2011^[1]*



For example, in the year 2009, the rate of unemployment reached 47,5 percent in Kosovo, 42,7 percent in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 32,2 percent in the Republic of Macedonia and 17,4 percent in Serbia. Following the economical and financial crisis, in all of these states, the rate of unemployment continued to grow reaching, as an example, in the year 2011 in Serbia, almost 23,7 percent.

[1] The source is the data from the World Bank and is expressed in millions of American dollars.

After the last decade of the past century marked in some states by violent armed confrontations and in others by the transition from a centralized market economy, attracting direct foreign investments by the Balkan states represented a necessity in order to reconstruct and develop the economy. Foreign investors have not only brought funds, but also have introduced new behavior rules in the business environment and in the interaction with the governmental institutions.

The presence of more and more foreign companies that come from the European Union space, the United States of America, and the Russian Federation or the Islamic space, proved that the image of the Balkans as a conflict area is in a continuous change. The most attractive states from the Balkans from the point of view of foreign investments in the year 2007 were Bulgaria and Montenegro. As the crisis started to show, most of the states from this region have recorded a significant decrease of the direct foreign investments, Albania being able to maintain a constant level for these, while Montenegro continued to represent a real magnet for foreign investors. In the case of Montenegro, we notice the massive presence of Russian investors, both in the area of tourism and in the real estate field.

Conclusions

Considering that the draft and the implementation of public policies supposes paying an increased attention to the efforts through which is desired to reduce as significant as possible the socio-economical delays, we notice that, in the Western Balkan states, the active involvement of the citizens in the decision making process remains quite reduced. The fact that the effects of the economical and financial crisis were felt by these states, especially by that segment of the population with small or average incomes, has created an instability of social and political type that has affected also the trust of the citizens in the efficiency of the measures to remedy the economy taken by the political class, under the careful supervision of the international institutions and the organizations that offered to give financial assistance in exchange for some austerity measures and reforms, especially in the public sector. In the light of these concerning evolutions, the main risk that continues to

threaten the regional stability is represented by the fact that more and more citizens (and especially the youngsters) drift away from the political environment and from the decision factors, and also by the increased level of mistrust regarding the efficient operation of the state institutions.

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