

Feb 7 2015

Ten rules by a 21st-century Machiavelli for the Balkan Prince

LSEGE2017



What would Machiavelli say about the Balkans today?, wonders **Florian Bieber**. In this letter for a modern Balkan Prince, he outlines ten rules that would allow the Prince to keep the power whatever the conditions. 'Ruling is like dancing on the edge of a volcano', he warns, suggesting, however, there are still ways to stay safe.

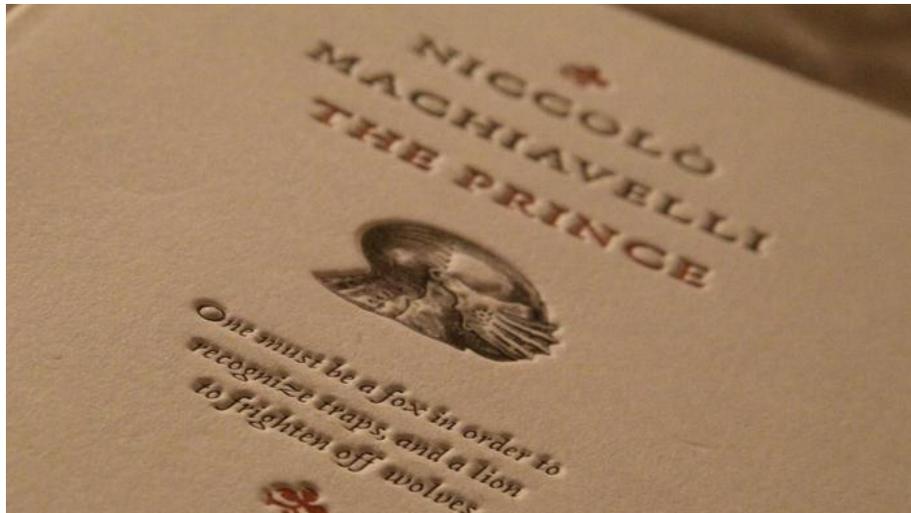


Photo: ask.com

Dear Balkan Prince,

Congratulations on your recent election.

I presume that you would like to retain power for as long as possible. While this is not as easy as it used to be, it is still possible, if you follow my ten rules outlined below.

You always have to remember that being considered a democrat and a reformer is a judgement that matters more if it comes from outside, from the EU, international observers and organizations. They might be stricter than your domestic audience, but they are also more ignorant and likely to lose interest quickly.

1. Control the elections, not on election day, but before

While some of your predecessors might have been able to just stuff ballot boxes or raise the dead to vote for you, or even better, make sure you have no opponents running in elections, this is no longer possible. You need to win elections and be also recognized by outsiders. These outsiders might be less picky in the Caucasus or Africa, but you have to look like a good democrat in the Balkans. My dear prince, this does not mean you have to be one. There are still a few ways to do well.

First, see elections as a way to get stronger. Time elections well: many and early elections can help catch the opposition off guard and also to have votes when your popularity is at its peak. Offer voters a bit of money, or forgive them their outstanding electricity bills, there are many ways in which you can get votes for little. Sometimes consider offering a bit of money for people not to vote (you know that they would just cast their ballots for your opponents). It also help to taint the opposition as being suspicious, sexually deviant, disloyal to the state, and generally dubious.

For more, refer to my book "Winning elections for dummies".

2. Control the media, make sure you have many voices, which all say the same and have your junk-yard dog

The media is what matters to retain power domestically.

Now, you don't own them any more, like other princes before you did. However, few of the media are economically viable and the best way to control them is to advertise only in the ones that report well on you (and don't forget, [you are the largest advertiser](#)). Many newspapers and TV stations are probably owned either by some Western media company who value profit margins over standards or a shady local businessman about whom you can certainly dig up some unpaid tax bills.

Journalists can sometimes be a bit pesky, and the best way to make sure that they are behaving well, is to threaten them a little bit, not in public, but pressure a few. Most will be happy to censor themselves.

3. Talk about the EU and wanting to join it, but make it hot and cold

You might not really care or understand the EU and this is fine, but wanting to join the EU is a must. Without this, you probably would not have got elected considering that all voters want EU membership. Furthermore, you could be left out in the dark if you don't support the EU, as forming a government requires a stamp of approval from the EU. Thus, want the EU, but throw in a dose of ambiguity. Being too pro-European these days seems like trying too hard with a partner who doesn't really want you. Thus, [throw some doubt on the project](#).

4. Talk about fighting corruption and reforms. Talk and talk and jail a few.

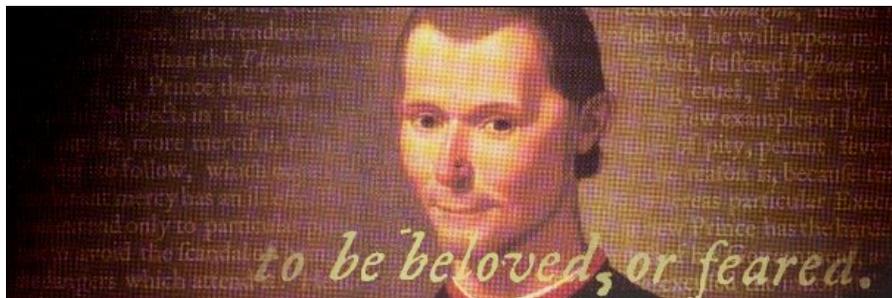
Who is in favour of corruption? Nobody. Thus, there is no safer topic to campaign on and talk about all the time. It is good to position yourself as a fearless fighter against corruption and presenting anybody corrupt as being against your rule, thus throwing a shadow of corruption over your opposition.

Of course, it is hard to stay in power without tolerating some corruption. Make sure that you have occasional successes, some arrests, trials. Keep in mind that arrests are more important than sentences. Also get a few of your own guys. It makes you seem more serious. Reports about modest lifestyle help, and declarations of assets can be taken with some degree of creative freedom.

5. Solve problems with your neighbours to get praise and create a few to be popular

The EU and outsiders like you to get on with your neighbours, so it is worth finding time to visit them, not only because they might have better sea town resorts: talk about regional cooperation, how we all share our European future (consult my book '100 speeches for the right occasion for Balkan princes').

Now, new or old problems with neighbours are very useful at home. They distract from other issues, give you an opportunity for some rallying around the flag. Nothing is better for boosting your popularity than some neighbour bashing. Thus, striking a balance between pleasing outsiders and feeding domestic sentiment is crucial here.



6. Pick different foreign friends, some will like you for what you are, some what you claim to be

The EU is your biggest investor, donor and prospect, but don't focus on them only. Flirting with others will make the EU a bit jealous and pay more attention to you. Plus, you can present yourself as being your own man. It is also important to consider that other investors and donors often [have fewer strings attached](#). Thus, you can use some resources to take care of domestic political favors. However, realize that they might also be using you, so [be prepared to be dropped when they stop caring](#).

7. Hire your voters. Fire your opponents

The best way to stay in power is to hire your voters, there are many jobs you can offer, from advisor to cleaning lady.

If it is clear that belonging to your party is what matters, this will help in terms of support for the party and votes. Many of your civil servants will recruit dozens of voters just to keep their jobs. Your opponents can always be fired, from the state administration or private jobs (after all, you probably control the largest share of funding in the state), or their fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers. There are [many ways to get them to think twice about what they say about you](#).

8. Rule of Law, your rules, your law

The internationals will talk and talk about rule of law. For this, dear Balkan prince, we recommend numerous action plans and strategies. However, in reality, it is important to ensure that the law is complicated enough that it cannot be universally applied, but that there is always a shadow of illegality hanging over that can be used, when needed. Demonstrators can get fined for obstructing traffic with high fines, and other little rules [can help you to remind them that your law is what rules](#).

9. Don't have an ideology, it can only hurt you

Don't have a clear ideology, this only commits you to certain positions that can create problems later on. [Focus on broad goals, such as Europe, freedom, prosperity and stay clear of too specific ambitions.](#)

Now, it is in your interest to join a European or International party family, such as the Socialist International or the European People's Party as an associate member or observer. They will give you some international legitimacy and moderate some potential international criticism. However, don't confuse this with ideology—nobody will vote for you due to ideology, they will vote for you because of you and the job you got for their aunt.

10. Promise change, but make sure it stays the same

Change is what everybody wants, your voters have lived through economic crises for some 28 of the past 35 years. They want the situation to get better, so don't promise to keep things as they are, but paint a picture of how they will be. However, change is risky. So keep things the same, change is an easy promise, but a risky reality. Now, change means constant campaigning. Run your office, as if you are running for office. This will make you look energetic, have you ready to go for any early election and also make you seem like you are still in opposition, even when you are not. Thus, [changing government composition, changing policy, announcing big plans are good ways to talk about change.](#)

Dear Balkan Prince,

Ruling is like dancing on the edge of a volcano. You can only rule if you claim to be a democrat in favor of EU integration, but you can only continue your rule for a long time by not acting on these claims. Both will bring others to power and might bring you to jail. Thus, you need to walk the tight line between saying the right things to your voters and the EU, and doing something else.

Good luck, there are some who are doing well, so with some skill, you might join their club.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSEE Research on South Eastern Europe, nor of the London School of Economics.

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