

Đorđe Tomić, Phantomgrenzen und regionale Autonomie im postsozialistischen Südosteuropa. Die Vojvodina und das Banat im Vergleich, Göttingen: Wallstein, 2016 (Phantomgrenzen im östlichen Europa, 6). 357 pp., ISBN 978-3-8353-1955-4, € 32.90

The transformations experienced in the postsocialist era attained particular attention of social scientists and, more recently, historians, who strove to explain the rapid changes of those turbulent times. Đorđe Tomić's study fits very well into this general framework of studying the postsocialist transitory era. In the last decade of the 20th century, many 'phantom-like' zones, areas, mindsets and political entities have emerged. The book reviewed here is a detailed study of two neighbouring zones, the Vojvodina in Serbia and the Banat in Romania. They share historical legacies, including claims for regional autonomy within the changing political systems of the 20th century. A comparative study of these two regions that applies the concept of *phantom borders* aptly presents the reader with the peculiarities of both areas in the past and in recent times.

Tomić's study focuses on how borders may be defined during transition, that is whether the established borders are contested or readily accepted. Issues of regional, border, political or geographical identities are highly controversial in the two regions at hand. The geographical definition of a region claims to be able to shape the identity of the people who live there, and to reshape this identity if the regional space changes. Thus, when political geographies change they also change their sociopolitical features. This repetitive feature through time, that is starting with a political entity in the past and recurring

contemporarily, is what the concept of phantom borders is about.

The newly established research field around the concept of phantom borders seeks to explain the persistence of former political spatial constructions in the present. It remains a bit doubtful, however, why Tomić chose to compare the two regions of the Vojvodina and the Banat. While the study of the Vojvodina is in-depth and detailed, the part on the Banat is more superficial, and sometimes even incomprehensible. To be sure, the author introduces the Banat merely as a 'contrasting foil' (53) to the core issue of the Vojvodina. Still, the way he treats the Banat comes across as too asymmetrical in comparison to his core interest, and it is not always obvious why comparison with the Banat is necessary to make his point. What is more, the conceptualisation of autonomy as sought by Vojvodinian society and the claim to multiculturalism put forth in the Banat seem two different tenets, or, at least, seem not to be sufficiently refined as concepts to establish a convincing base for comparison.

The author gives preference to the developments after the so-called 'Yoghurt revolution' in Yugoslavia at the end of 1988. This name refers to events in the Vojvodina in the course of the anti-bureaucratic revolution carried out by supporters of the Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević. The massive street protests led to the overthrow of the governments in the autonomous provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo, and was one of the defining moments in the development towards state dissolution and war. In the course of this overthrow, protesters threw yoghurt onto the Vojvodinian parliament building. This is the starting point of a long-lasting renegotiation of autonomy (and therefore borders) in the

decade-long agony of the state that once was Yugoslavia.

Tomić introduces his book with a lengthy theoretical part on how borders have changed in postsocialist Europe, and how the concept of phantom borders helps to understand these developments. The chapter dedicated to the Vojvodina (some 160 pages) is almost four times as large as the one on the Banat (some 40 pages). Serving as a 'control variable' with regard to how the imperial legacies were revived, it remains unclear how this small chapter enhances the general framework of the book. Tomić seems to use the Banat comparison to make the point that the Vojvodina is by no means special, but that similar references to the imperial past redefined borders elsewhere, too.

Tomić succeeds in demonstrating how the regionalist movement in the Vojvodina returned to ancient imperial legacies in order to bring home its political point. Imperial times were idealised, and the borders redefined in an imperial spirit. Contrary to Kosovo, the second Serbian autonomous province in socialist Yugoslavia, the Vojvodina did not evolve into an independent state. It nurtured its imperial legacy to imagine a specific regionalism rooted in Habsburgian Central Europe. The 'national' framework thereby is bypassed.

If phantom borders are former political borders that continue to take effect in the present, then it remains a question whether the concept can be convincingly used for the Vojvodina and the Banat. Here, we do not have previously existing borders; they actually continue to exist. As said, we are not talking about state borders here; yet, for the people living in and around these two regions the regional borders are very clear and well-defined. And this is true not only in terms of habit and tradition, but also in terms of current administrative

units. Therefore, Tomić's conceptual approach leaves room for discussion: where, effectively, are the phantom borders of the Vojvodina and the Banat?

The author makes an enormous effort with regard to the secondary literature he used, and also delivers a comprehensive survey of the available archival materials. Again, this is more true for the Vojvodina than for the Banat. In general, his study is a good recent history (*Zeitgeschichte*, in German) of the Vojvodina, with a Banat addendum. Both regions' imperial history under the Habsburg Monarchy is reiterated in a relatively fair way. However, the impact of the Habsburg legacy on recent times is addressed only in terms of the emergence of regional narratives back then, which continue to influence present regional self-definitions. The historical perception of the Danube Monarchy most certainly plays a role in present shapings of the regions at stake.

At the end of the book, the author explains in his concluding remarks (11 pages) how phantom borders within the national borders of two different countries, Serbia and Romania (although some regions are overlapping or intersecting) have appeared in postsocialism. Phantom borders are borders that no longer have an actual political shape. However, instead of disappearing, they become dormant. When the sociopolitical opportunity arises, they reemerge in the context of appropriating political claims and behaviours as well as social actions and reactions of the populace within those borders.

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