Book Review

Aleksandar Pavlović, Gazela Pudar Draško and Rigels Halili, eds. 2019. *Rethinking Serbian-Albanian Relations. Figuring Out the Enemy*, Abingdon/New York: Routledge (Southeast European Studies). xix + 233 pp., ISBN: 978-1-138-57483-0 (Hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-351-27316-9 (eBook), £ 120 / £ 33.29

Reviewed by **Hendrik Geiling**, Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies, Regensburg, Germany; and Department of Modern History, Phillips University Marburg, Marburg, Germany. E-mail: geiling@students.uni-marburg.de

<https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2021-0018>

Rethinking Serbian-Albanian Relations is the outcome of an interdisciplinary joint project by Serbian and Albanian academics focussing on the existing animosities between Serbs and Albanians. The project's lead institution was the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory of the University of Belgrade in partnership with the Serbian civil society organisation “KPZ Beton”. In addition to the University of Belgrade, researchers were affiliated with—among other institutions—the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts and the Institute for Literature and Art (both in Belgrade), as well as with the Centre for Albanian Studies in Tirana and the Aleksandër Moisiu University of Durrës. In the volume's foreword, the authors clarify their intention to understand current Serbian-Albanian hostility and to grasp the origins and reasons for this discourse, its actors and channels, and the media disseminating it. Moreover, the editors make a scientific-political claim by calling for a breakthrough in Serbian and Albanian academic relations, paving the way for the establishment, or re-establishment, of cooperation between Serbian and Albanian scientists. They also hope to have an impact on contexts beyond academia and to reach a broader readership in order to overcome hostilities and “promote some other, different relations” (xviii).

With its four sections and 13 chapters, the volume is an abridged version of the original book in Serbian and Albanian entitled *Figura neprijatelja: pre-osmišljavanje srpsko-albanskih odnosa / Figura e armikut: ripërftytyrimi i marrëdhënieve shqiptaro-serbe*, published in 2015 by IFDT/KPZ Beton in Belgrade and subsequently by Qendra Multimedia in Pristina in 2016. The primary version is twice as long, featuring seven sections and 24 chapters. The shortened chapters, dealing with the historical evolution of Serbian-Albanian hostility, conflicting memory policies and national minority issues, give a comprehensive perspective on the topic—the abridgement was the result of an editorial decision by the publisher, Routledge.

The structure of the abridged translation remains cohesive. The first section, “Whose Land Is It?”, deals with the historical background of Serbian-Albanian relations today (*Aleksandar Pavlović, Srđan Atanasovski and Vladan Jovanović*). The second section, “The Yugoslav Experiment”, covers the mutual perceptions of Serbians and Albanians in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and after the Kosovo War of 1999 (*Marjan Ivković, Tamara Petrović Trifunović, Srđan Prodanović, Atdhe Hetemi and Shkëlzen Gashi*). The third section approaches the issue of the positioning of intellectuals in discourses during the most recent Serbian-Albanian conflicts (*Saša Ćirić, Rigels Halili and Gazela Pudar Draško*). The fourth section discusses cooperation between certain groups in Serbian and Albanian society (*Armanda Hysa, Jelena Lončar, Ana Birešev and Adriana Zaharijević*).

To understand why Serbian-Albanian relations are burdened with hate, it is essential to understand history. The early nationalisms in the Balkans were dominated by liberation narratives which were opposed by the Habsburg and Ottoman empires. Hence, the different national movements first saw each other as allies against the imperial powers. But especially with the cumulative push-back of the Ottoman Empire, conflictive dimensions arose among the emerging nations. From the middle of the nineteenth century, Serbian travel writers for example developed a specific discourse by writing and mapping the narrative of an “Old Serbia” which included Kosovo, northern Albania and northwestern North Macedonia—regions with large, majority Albanian populations (Atanasovski, 22). Kosovo took a special place in the Serbian national narrative as the “cradle of the nation”, a position it still holds today. It is therefore logical that Jovanović analyses the territorial and demographic measures introduced in Kosovo by the Serbian elites between 1912 and 1950, showing that these measures were guided by the idea of Serbia’s historical right to prevail over Kosovo (40–3). Albanians were perceived to be in the way of any concept of a homogenous Serbian national state. While Albanians were first seen as heroes, allies and friends in the fight against the Ottomans, they later were described as “rabies [sic], savage and blood-thirsty” (Pavlović, 6–14). Pavlović accurately terms this external, stereotypical discourse “Albanism” (4–5), modelled upon Maria Todorova’s concept of “Balkanism”—the stereotype-creating discourses on the Balkans produced by Western societies.¹

In the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, negative and stereotypical discourses in relation to the Albanian population persisted. Hetemi emphasises the point—particularly important for the understanding of Serbian-Albanian hostility—that these stereotypes were maintained by “high institutional instances, mainly academic and the politically/state-controlled community, and did not

1 Todorova, M. N. 1997. *Imagining the Balkans*. New York: Oxford University Press.

necessarily come from the society itself” (86). These discourses in academic circles were perpetuated after the collapse of socialist Yugoslavia, not only in Serbia, but also in Albania. The stringent comparative analysis of two political texts published by the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (*Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti*, SANU) and the Albanian Academy of Sciences (*Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë*, ASH)—the 1986 “Memorandum” by SANU and the 1998 “Platform for the Solution of the National Albanian Question” by ASH—reveals the remarkable analogies in argument in both texts. With their demonisation of the “other”, the victimisation of “us”, and the presentation of “our” views as natural and right and “their” views as wrong and unnatural, both texts present a one-sided vision that seeks to legitimise the ideas of Serbian and Albanian nationalism respectively (Halili, 137–8).

The unresolved conflict over Kosovo is predominant in official commemorative cultures in both Serbia and Kosovo. On both sides, public authorities transmit their nationalist thinking into their respective society by presenting a one-sided and false picture of the Kosovo War in history textbooks. For example, textbooks in Serbia fail to mention the crimes of Serbian forces against Kosovo Albanians, while on the other hand, textbooks in Kosovo do not refer to the crimes committed by the Kosovo Liberation Army (*Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës*, UÇK) against Serbs, non-Albanians and so-called Albanian collaborators. Also, the numbers of casualties are either raised or downplayed, according to the respective legitimacy needs. Thus, official memory policies on both sides “create a room of misunderstanding” (Gashi, 100).

But cooperation between certain groups in Serbian and Albanian society does exist. Hysa shows that marriage between Serbian men from the Sandžak region and Albanian women from rural areas in northern Albania takes place as a post-socialist phenomenon aimed at preserving patriarchal family structures. Here, the conservative moral concept dominating both regions overlies divisive nationalisms (176–7). Furthermore, the official efforts by the Kosovar state to legally protect Serbian cultural heritage seems to indicate interethnic Serbian–Albanian cooperation. However, Lončar’s case study on the implementation of the respective laws in the historical city centre of Prizren and the village of Velika Hoča/Hoçë e Madhe—a historical local centre of the Serbian Orthodox Church—shows that these laws were adopted only as a result of international pressure. Right from their inception, the laws were framed by the negative portrayal of Serbs and the Serbian Orthodox Church on the part of the Albanian majority, which in fact led to an increase in ethnic tensions. While the legislative framework “guarantees full protection of minority rights, political institutions in Kosovo encourage ethnic cleaving and inter-ethnic tension” (192).

Cross-border cooperation between the Serbian NGO “Women in Black” and “Kosovo’s Women’s Network”, as well as the building of a “Women’s Peace

Coalition” by Serbian and Kosovo Albanian women, exemplify that multilateral remembering of the Kosovo War is possible. The women activists break nationalist notions by rejecting official commemorative cultures and forming a new community not defined by ethnic boundaries. With reference to Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, Zaharijević calls this “the community of the dispossessed” (216).

Although there are several missed opportunities for comparative approaches in some chapters (chapters 1, 2, 3, 5, 7 and 12), the volume shows integral coherence. Its structure represents nothing less than a milestone as Serbian and Albanian scientists leave dividing nationalist ideologies behind and work together on the complex topic of burdened Serbian-Albanian relations. They succeed in deconstructing nationalist Serbian-Albanian hostility, which has been essentially fuelled by the academic and political elites. Hence, they deliver a scientific contribution to enhancing Serbian-Albanian understanding. The volume is a plea for rationality, objectivity, differentiation and intercultural cooperation. It would be desirable to see this joint venture followed up by numerous similar collaborations and an essential revision of Serbian–Albanian relations.