Book Review

Eltion Meka and Stefano Bianchini, eds. 2020. *The Challenges of Democratization and Reconciliation in the Post-Yugoslav Space*, Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag (Southeast European Integration Perspectives 13). 295 pp. ISBN: 978-3-8487-6904-9 (Hardcover), ISBN: 978-3-7489-2151-6 (eBook), €64.00 / €64.00

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In the decade of the 2010s the eclipse of interest of the United States in the region of the Western Balkans became obvious, while the European Union (EU) prioritized regional stability and stability in the region's political regimes, often at the expense of further democratization. European enlargement to the Western Balkans, however, restarted with the European Commission's statement in February 2018 that Montenegro and Serbia could join the EU by 2025 (an ambitious projection) and the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in March 2020.

For the countries of the region, the challenge of integration into the EU goes hand-in-hand with the challenges of democratization and reconciliation which the two editors, Eltion Meka and Stefano Bianchini, and the 12 contributors to their volume analyze. The editors pose the main questions of the book: "What is the interplay between democratization and reconciliation, and how are these processes affected by the process of European integration?" (21). While the editors humbly present this volume as a textbook for students and the wider public, in reality they and the rest of the volume's authors serve a higher double purpose. They inform the reader who is unfamiliar with the region on major political, social, and historical developments of the post-1989 period and they also contribute to ongoing academic and policy debates on what is to be done with past legacies (e.g. nationalism) and unresolved dilemmas (e.g. how to pursue reconciliation without provoking further ethnic tensions).

In the first chapter, Davor Pauković and Višeslav Raos flesh out the difficulties of pursuing democratization and reconciliation simultaneously with nation- and state-building. Indeed, the seven Western Balkan nations surveyed in this chapter strive to accomplish nothing less. And in doing so, national elites come across their own unwillingness to come to terms with the recent past, i.e. with their own problematic turns in foreign affairs and wrong policy choices in the domestic political scene. In the volume's most theoretical Chapter 2, Pero Maldini lays out

different conceptualizations of democracy. He contrasts the minimalist with the substantive concept of democracy, before setting the institutional, socioeconomic, and cultural preconditions for substantive democracy. In the following chapter, Goran Patrick Filic goes one step further. He explains the differences between participatory and deliberative democracy which, as he correctly writes, are often conflated. Filic discusses how either of these two models of democracy could contribute to reconciliation. In a very rich analysis, he illustrates his argument with concrete attempts at reconciliation (or the lack thereof) in the Western Balkans. He concludes that strong democracy is a prerequisite for reconciliation which in turn is necessary for “social and economic prosperity” (99).

Meka and Maja Savić-Bojanić open up a wider vista for the reader by placing democratization and reconciliation in the perspective of EU integration. The challenge of simultaneously promoting democracy and reconciliation is a formidable one. It is not linear, let alone smooth, either for the EU or the Western Balkan countries. For instance, the Western Balkan countries have embarked on the road to Europe from different starting bases, while the EU’s enlargement policy has changed over time. Thus, despite good intentions, the result is further ethnic separation, rather than reconciliation, in the region (121).

In the volume’s most comprehensive chapter, Stefano Bianchini, a renowned historian and analyst of Balkan politics, explains how the EU and other international actors have conditioned democratization and reconciliation in the Western Balkans. Employing international history and his deep knowledge of the region’s current affairs, the author gives historical depth to the study of “imported democracy” and obstacles in the way of democratization and reconciliation. Bianchini reminds us of the enduring high impact of nationalism on the region’s affairs. He also points out that reconciliation is necessary not only between states which have been at war against one another, but also domestically, between ethnic groups. At the end, he correctly asserts that it is meaningless for international actors to attempt to homogenize the region’s heterogeneous groups. After all, Europe itself has been transformed into a union of peace and prosperity, despite the heterogeneity of European nations (147).

After these first five chapters, which belong to a section on basic dilemmas of the post-Yugoslav space, a second, more specialized, section follows. It is more thematic and more focused than the first. Naturally, the section starts with a chapter on ethno-religious nationalism in the Western Balkans, by Ilir Kalemaj and Sokol Lleshi. As the two authors claim, nationalism and the Western Balkans are two terms which have almost become synonymous. The two authors note that while such an identification bears the marks of foreign negative stereotypes about the Balkans, today countries of the region instrumentalize nationalism in intra-regional relations. Some elites also understand that nationalism is an obstacle to

their integration into the EU. However, the legacies of nationalism date back at least to the inter-war period (e.g., the Albanian and Serbian brands of nationalism) and hamper democratization and reconciliation. The chapter's authors justifiably insist on the long-term negative impact of ethno-religious nationalism.

In the middle of the book, one comes across a beautiful surprise. One of the architects of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Johan J. du Toit, contributes a personal memory, which is also an instructive essay on the foundation and operation of that court. He gives an insider's view of the difficulties to administer justice after the end of Yugoslav wars and includes quotes from exchanges with victims, witnesses, and the accused at the ICTY. The author intersperses his text with clear explanations of legal terms as well as with conceptual distinctions, crucial to understand the differences of trials at ICTY from the Nuremberg Trials in post-war Germany and the Truth and Reconciliation commission in South Africa.

The two chapters which follow are on borders and on intellectuals. Both chapters naturally fit a textbook on today's Western Balkans, where there is a recurring debate on redrawing national frontiers, permeated by historical and legal arguments produced by intellectuals. Maja Pulić writes on borders and boundaries as obstacles to reconciliation. She starts from a historical overview of international borders, including a necessary analysis of the Treaty of Westphalia (1648). Then she moves to modern conceptions of borders as territorial boundaries of political communities, as identity demarcations and as socially constructed institutions. The author then illustrates her theoretical analysis with a brief discussion of border issues in Bosnia-Herzegovina, before ending with a note on cross-border cooperation and the status of border regions.

Gazela Pudar Draško and Aleksandar Pavlović discuss the role of intellectuals. The chapter begins with a succinct discussion of the role of intellectuals in modern societies. While we normally associate intellectuals with the construction of national identity in the Western Balkans, the authors provide a much more nuanced picture before and after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Under Tito, intellectuals diverged from the government line debating the further integration of Yugoslavia's federal system, while Serb and Slovene intellectuals produced memoranda of simmering resentment. Yet, as the two authors document, intellectuals did not always propagate conflict. Anti-conflict circles of intellectuals emerged during the wars of Yugoslavia's dissolution, while dialogues between Serb and Croat historians were rolled out after the wars ended.

No textbook on the Western Balkans is worth its name unless it includes a chapter on minorities. Simona Mameli and Sanja Kajinić write from a theoretical and policy-oriented perspective. In addition to ethnic minorities, they discuss social or cultural minorities like linguistic minorities, and the LGBTQ, focusing on

the reproduction of minority discrimination through education. They also mount a critique against received wisdom on power-sharing as the suitable arrangement for ethnically-divided societies. In their perceptive analysis, accommodation of ethnic relations in such societies is counter-productive, if not accompanied by a spirit of accommodation. Without an accommodative political culture, diffused in society, power-sharing remains a privilege of the ethnic elites, while on the ground formal inclusion of minorities is accompanied by their informal exclusion (229). Shifting their analysis to political theory, the two authors suggest that deliberative democracy offers channels through which ethnic conflict could give way to reconciliation and thus to substantive democratization in the Western Balkans.

In his chapter, Marco Zoppi offers a sociological approach to the question of human mobility “in, out and across the region” (249). The scope of his analysis is refreshingly varied. Zoppi discusses forced migration in the wake of the Yugoslav wars, labor migration, horizontal mobility within a country, emigration from the region to Western Europe and North America, and migration of third-country nationals through the “Balkan route” in the 2010s. He links all these patterns of mobility to failures of democratization and reconciliation in numerous ways. For instance, he interprets failed democratization and reconciliation as factors pushing Balkan youths out of their country of origin. And he illuminates the role of Balkan diaspora communities abroad in reproducing ethnic divisions at home, but also—on a more optimistic note—their potential role in the transmission and circulation of novel, reconciliatory ideas at home.

In the concluding chapter, the volume’s editors weave together the themes discussed and questions posed by the contributors. The editors rightly point to conditions of “unstable change” and a “state of tension” in the Western Balkans. One of their best points is that domestic elites attempt to achieve security by establishing nation-states, based on ethnic group loyalty, military preparation, and useful alliances. In other words, elites work within a very traditional mindset, while they simultaneously aspire to join the EU, which does not rely on such features of security, but on cooperation with neighbors. The editors also incisively note that, in a never-ending cycle, the same actors recall injustices done to them by neighbors and desire “redemption, if not revenge” (277). These patterns evolve in parallel with the skepticism of the EU member states about the EU’s further enlargement. Evidently, Meka and Bianchini take an agnostic position towards the region’s future prospects.

It is noteworthy that all chapters of the volume serve the purpose of producing a textbook, by including small “boxes” with definitions of basic social science and legal concepts (e.g., democracy, EU accession) and terms specific to the analysis of the region (e.g., the Macedonian question, the Dayton Peace Agreement).

Moreover, each chapter includes a basic bibliography for students to do further reading as well as specific references for specialists.

In such a varied set of contributions to an edited volume, unavoidably there are aspects which could have been addressed with more precision or detail. For instance, in Chapter 1, Albanian nationalism, manifested in Albania and Kosovo, probably deserved more detailed analysis. Over the years, in Kosovo Kurti's populist-nationalist party has increased its electoral influence, while in Albania mainstream parties have adopted an increasingly nationalist discourse. The lucid analysis of modern democracy in Chapter 2 could have included thoughts on how economic development is not always accompanied by democratization (e.g., the cases of China and Singapore), while in consolidated democracies a culture of undemocratic authoritarian populism may thrive too (e.g., the cases of Hungary and Poland). In the same, otherwise useful chapter, it would be worth briefly noting empirical examples of how procedural democracy struggled to become embedded in the Western Balkans, before it started to backslide in the 2000s and even more so in the 2010s. Further on, in Chapter 6 it would have been useful to include short sections on other ethno-religious nationalisms, beyond the Albanian and Serbian ones. The important analysis of borders and boundaries in Chapter 8 could have been enriched with more empirical detail on border issues in the Western Balkans. Besides border divisions within Bosnia-Herzegovina, one would have gladly read about the reverting of Eastern Slavonia to Croatian authority in 1997 or the ethnic boundary separating Northern and Southern Mitrovica along the Ibar river, among many other examples. Moreover, the discussion of minorities in Chapter 10 could have been more grounded in the empirical context of the Western Balkans' ethnic conflicts. The chapter's analysis is quickly sidetracked to theoretical elaborations of consociationalism, cultural rights, and democratic deliberation, which are of course tempting for mature scholars, but perhaps less useful for students or less-informed readers of the Western Balkans' politics. Finally, some of the volume's contributors could have polished their use of the English language.

Needless to say, such criticisms do not minimize the volume's two main accomplishments. First, it is a lucidly written textbook that could prove indispensable for university teachers and students of contemporary Balkan politics. Second, one finds in this book a rare combination of clear, but no less sophisticated, presentation of concepts, facts, and alternative interpretations, which a newcomer in the field of the Western Balkans' studies needs to know, with numerous new insights, which any experienced observer of the post-Yugoslav space should think about.