Book Review

Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020 (New Perspectives on South-East Europe). 155 pp., ISBN: 978-3-030-22148-5 (Hardcover), ISBN: 978-3-030-22149-2 (eBook), € 53.49 (Hardcover), € 42.79 (eBook)

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The last decade in the Western Balkans has been characterised by a series of political, economic, and social crises that have significantly altered the region’s course since the first years of this century. Long gone are the (seemingly) halcyon days of the period immediately following the conclusion of the Yugoslav Wars (1991–2001), during which the prospects of European and Atlantic integration for the whole of the former Yugoslavia (and Albania) seemed a distant but close to certain prospect. The commitments by European, American, and local leaders that undergirded that moment of relative optimism have definitively evaporated.

As international policymakers, academics, and local citizens look ahead to the 2020s, the region’s new horizon is starkly different: the near wholesale dissolution of the European integration project for the Western Balkan Six (WB6), i.e. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Albania; further NATO enlargement has become a major source of local and geopolitical friction; endemic rates of emigration are foreshadowing permanent economic stagnation; the rise of protest politics has introduced the spectre of revolutionary fervour into regional political dynamics; and the resurgence of illiberal and authoritarian tendencies in both the EU and non-EU states of the region has made traditional avenues of democratic transformation increasingly difficult.

Florian Bieber’s *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans* is the latest work to tackle the last-mentioned of these issues, although, as the author notes, the origins of Balkan authoritarianism are multifaceted and not isolated from broader global trends (1–2). Bieber is careful to stress that he does not view the region as exceptional for its recent democratic backsliding, and he emphasizes the global and comparative lessons afforded by the study of a handful of countries, like the WB6, with a largely shared recent history.

Indeed, the novelty of his approach specifically has to do with how Bieber positions his study of regional authoritarian and illiberal patterns viz. the process of EU integration. As he states: ‘What unites the countries explored in this book is

the process of EU integration which sets it apart from countries already part of the union and thus not restricted by conditionality and those outside a formal accession process and equally less monitored and observed by the EU, such as Eastern European countries like Ukraine or Moldova. Structurally, with accession and conditionality at least formally in place, no group of countries is at least formally under greater pressure to adopt democratic institutions and comply with the rule of law requirements of the EU than the Western Balkans' (3). In this sense, this is as much an examination of Western Balkan governance trends as it is of the EU's transformative capacities in its 'neighbourhood', and is largely in keeping with Bieber's academic and analytical output over the last several years.

From a technical standpoint, the book is divided into three core thematic chapters, which each tackle different aspects of the collapse of the democratisation project in the region. Each of these chapters can be read as a stand-alone article. While Bieber introduces the core structure of his argument in the introduction, which serves as the first chapter, Chapter Two provides a brief historical survey concerning the origins of authoritarian patterns in the region, which Bieber largely credits to the repressive nature of the former communist regimes in Yugoslavia and Albania, and their mutation into 'competitive authoritarian systems' (17–20) in the 1990s rather than their collapse, as happened in most of Eastern Europe. Chapter Three provides case studies of the varieties of democratic backsliding in the region, in which Bieber (astutely) also includes Croatia, despite the country's entry into the EU in 2013. Chapter Four is, arguably, the most provocative of the volume, and offers a close analysis of the mechanisms of political control and manipulation which local regimes have used to keep themselves ensconced in power for much of the last three decades. Scholars and students trying to grapple with the fundamentals of local patterns of non-democratic governance, especially those new to the region, would be well served by treating this chapter as a kind of primer on the subject.

To wit, considering the newfound currency of Balkan and Southeast European studies, this book will most obviously find traction among new (and returning) scholars of the region. That, in a sense, is also its primary limitation—not to say flaw. For established scholars and analysts of the Western Balkans, Bieber's text is familiar reading. It is a useful summary of the phenomenon of renewed authoritarian tendencies in the region, and a one-stop-shop entry point to the broader literature on the subject. But Bieber makes no grand claims, nor does he deviate far from the contention that non-democratic patterns of governance in the region are rooted in the region's communist period. Those inclined to take a longer view of the subject—by citing regional experiences with the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and interwar regimes, and compounding legacies of each of these for contemporary attempts at democracy—will be left wanting by his analysis, although they will

benefit from his detailed anatomy of contemporary authoritarian mechanisms in the region.

This pithy text will doubtlessly remain a mainstay introductory treatment of the subject and will likewise find a wider audience among scholars of comparative authoritarianisms for its succinct discussion of famously complex Western Balkan politics. Bieber's book will be most enthusiastically received by those in need of a manuscript that neatly distils the existing literature, provides clear analyses of the primary drivers of authoritarian-illiberal patterns in the region, and largely steers clear of major theoretical contentions of its own. As such, Bieber's work is to be commended, above all, for its lucidity and accessibility.