Book Review

Florian Bieber / Nikolaos Tzifakis, eds, *The Western Balkans in the World. Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries*, London, New York: Routledge, 2019 (Southeast European Studies). 272 pp., ISBN: 978-036-719-799-5 (Hardcover), ISBN: 978-042-924-334-9 (eBook), £ 120.00 (Hardcover), £ 33.29 (eBook)

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The accelerated return of geopolitics reminds us that the Western Balkans are an integral part of Europe, and that the future of the European Union (EU) and of the Western Balkans are interconnected. The Covid-19 pandemic has even given the Balkans a new geopolitical dynamic. Delays in EU and NATO accession after remarkably successful decades of Euro-Atlantic integration provide a fertile ground for external influences. ‘Euro-Atlantic integration has not advanced as originally planned’ (1) state the editors, Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis, in the introduction to their book on linkages and relations with non-Western countries in the region. While North Macedonia became a NATO member in March 2020, scepticism and concern have been growing as to whether the region will ever be accepted into the EU.

Every crisis and every uncertainty has so far opened doors to external non-Western actors in the Western Balkans. The watershed came after the financial crisis of 2008, as well as the declaration of the independence of Kosovo and the crisis in Georgia in the same year, followed by the Ukrainian conflict in 2013–2014, the influx of refugees via the Balkan route in 2015, the Brexit referendum of 2016, and the Covid-19 pandemic today. Local governments have carefully linked their policies to various big players—as is evident, for example, in the double game being played by Serbia. Serbia is an EU candidate country benefiting from EU financial aid to meet the challenges of the pandemic, but at the same time maintains cosy relations with both Russia and China.

Bieber und Tzifakis have succeeded in winning outstanding experts in their field to contribute to their volume in which the role of Russia, China, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the region is subjected to a multidimensional examination: by sector, by country, and by actor. The first part is devoted to security policy issues (*Tobias Flessenkemper* and *Marko Kmezić*) and economic development (*Matteo Bonomi* and *Milica Uvalić*). The second part follows with

country studies on Serbia (*Florent Marciacq*), Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Adnan Huskić*), Kosovo (*Gëzim Visoka*), North Macedonia (*Zoran Nechev* and *Ivan Nikolovski*), Montenegro (*Jovana Marović*), and Albania (*Enika Abazi*). Finally, the third part focuses on external actors: Russia (*Dimitar Bechev*), China (*Anastas Vangeli*), Turkey (*Ahmet Erdi Öztürk* and *Samim Akgönül*), and the United Arab Emirates (*Will Bartlett* and *Tena Prelec*).

The Freedom House Nations in Transit 2020 report shows that the region has been backsliding in terms of democracy and rule of law in recent years. Many linkages between external actors and the countries in the region have not only affected the domestic political party spectrum, but have also impacted on procurement, transparency, corruption, and state capture by the ruling elites. To what extent are the influences of external actors a threat to the liberal reform agenda of the West? Have they led to ‘the return of former practices of competitive authoritarianism’ (Bartlett and Prelec, 243)?

Historical legacies—the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union—nurture a sense of cultural, religious, and social identity, and can be mobilised against the liberal democratic reform agenda. Not least due to the extradition of Gülen supporters to Turkey, there have been increasing warnings that the growing influence exerted by the Islamic world on the southeastern part of Europe is not receiving enough attention in the EU. Erdoğan’s Turkey is also becoming increasingly attractive as a political role model for countries in the region. Interestingly, in their analysis of UAE engagement, Bartlett and Prelec argue that linkages have developed within a specific political culture which may be called ‘sultanism’ (242).

To what extent is there a correlation between bilateral links and (non-)alignment with European values and restrictive measures, such as those discussed by Zoran Nechev and Ivan Nikolovski regarding Russian support for former Macedonian prime minister Nikola Gruevski? Even if ‘neither Russia nor Turkey have been able to shape the new security architecture in the Western Balkans’ (Flessenkemper and Kmezić, 32), security questions arise both in the classical military sense (Serbia) and in soft security terms as in the course of possible islamisation/radicalisation (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo) or the establishment of a surveillance state through artificial intelligence (Serbia).

Economy is another core issue: data indicate that in terms of economic assistance and economic interdependencies, the EU is by far the region’s most important partner. But the 2018 scenarios compiled by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, listed by Anastas Vangeli (205), suggest that the Western Balkans will at best catch up with the EU average in 2035 (if the region manages to achieve pre-crisis growth rates). To what extent does the disparate economic situation in the Western Balkans open the door to foreign investment by

Russia (energy), China (infrastructure projects), Turkey and the UAE (social engagement, education, real estate) on a large scale? Have the new economic linkages and influences really, as stated by Matteo Bonomi and Milica Uvalić (56), created opportunities rather than constraints? Or, as Florent Marciacq warns in his remarkable contribution, is there ultimately ‘the risk for Serbia to lose the upper hand [...] thereby compromising its capacity to reach its strategic objective of EU integration’ (79)?

Russia’s interest is often described as being focused on hindering the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region. In addition, Moscow is seen to offer political backing to anti-reform forces in the Western Balkans. Maksim Samurokov of the Carnegie Moscow Center stated recently that many observers accuse Russia of stirring up yet more trouble in the Balkans. However, according to Dimitar Bechev, expert on Russia and Southeastern Europe, although ‘Russia plays a prominent role in the Balkans, its influence is often exaggerated’ (199). The book provides sufficient material to uphold Bechev’s assessment.

For Turkey, however, the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans region is of strategic interest. Ahmet Erdi Öztürk and Samim Akgonül convincingly explain the new Turkish foreign policy implemented by the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) which frequently features ‘religious- and ethnic-oriented activities’, thereby carrying the conflict between the AKP and Gülen into the Western Balkans (Bosnia, Kosovo, North Macedonia). Adnan Huskić traces these changes in Turkish foreign policy in his contribution on Bosnia and Herzegovina. Besides pressure on the Bosnian Party of Democratic Action (*Stranka demokratske akcije*, SDA) government to annul the Gülen presence on the one hand, Turkey has also shown constant positive influence on Bosnia’s NATO and EU membership bids (83–89).

China is building roads and railways. Chinese investment has been welcome because it helped some of the Southeast European countries to come out of the difficult economic situation after the financial crisis in 2008. Although the Belt and Road Initiative was initially applauded, the economic benefits and geostrategic consequences might not be in the EU’s interest. And, as Enika Abazi rightly warns for Albania, infrastructure projects are both an opportunity and a challenge because they burden the government with large debt (173). China, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, participates in the work of the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) in Bosnia and is playing a role in the future of Kosovo, but, as Gëzim Visoka states, contrary to Russia it is conducting a consistent policy of non-interference and disengagement on the issue of Kosovo statehood (120). Jovana Marović argues that China has not shown any interest in interfering in domestic politics in Montenegro. Highly problematic, however, is the use of Chinese artificial intelligence for surveillance on an increasing scale, as in Serbia.

The predominantly economic interest of the United Arab Emirates in the region is growing. After mainly providing postwar humanitarian aid to Kosovo and Bosnia, the UAE today sees the region as an entry opportunity into European markets. For example, the UAE's reported involvement in the Serbian arms industry, as well as investments in aviation and agriculture, illustrate this point. These investments are often non-transparent and investors are accused of corruption and contravening EU standards. Finally, the use of soft power instruments—above all the construction of mosques and the work of missionary organisations—could lead to increasing Islamic radicalisation.

The findings presented in the book highlight a variety of layers and players: non-Western actors, the respective local actors, and recipient countries. It is a well-researched and important publication on the extent of non-Western influence in the region, as well as on Euro-Atlantic achievements, deficiencies, failures, and challenges. The editors, Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis, together with the book's authors, have succeeded in contributing to a better and in-depth understanding of the complex and multifaceted links with regard to 'not just the extent of engagement, but also the impact' (261) of non-Western activities in the region.

The volume provides an excellent insight and overview of the multilayered relations and interdependencies between external actors—China, Russia, Turkey, and the UAE—and the Western Balkans. Even for readers familiar with the region and the subject, there are new insights, additional food for thought, and refreshing approaches. For the academic community, the book offers ideas for further research. For example, the intriguing elaboration of theoretical models for the analysis of external influences, as revealed in the introductory chapter by the editors, is unfortunately taken up only by some of the authors and would merit further scrutiny. The value of the book (now also available in Greek translation) lies in the timely and outstanding systematic, as well as comparative, analysis of external non-Western influences in the Western Balkans, thereby underlining the importance of this region beyond geopolitics. I highly recommend the volume to policymakers, academics, and media representatives interested in European foreign and security policy.