Book Review


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What is transition? How do multiple transitions in the economic, social, and political sphere interact and affect each other? These and other questions were at the heart of scholarly research between the mid-1990s and the 2010s. The end of communism in Eastern Europe, the break-up of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia, along with the European Union’s eastern enlargement and global shifts towards unipolar American dominance, required new academic attention, resulting in discussions on “The End of History” and the “Third Wave of Democratisation”, as well as on the rise of new nationalisms and explanations for the renewed conflict within and between the newly emerging states.

Christophe Solioz does not engage with these transition issues per se. Instead, he looks at transitions—non-linear, overlapping transformation, counter-transformation, and complex changes in Eastern Europe—in order to understand how the region has got to where it is today. Most remarkable about the book is its focus on deconsolidation, i.e. recognition that the transition to liberal democracy in some countries in Eastern Europe has not been linear and permanent. From Hungary to Poland, from Bulgaria to most of the post-Yugoslav states, we have seen a revival of authoritarianism, the return of debates about the nation, and the questioning of many assumptions considered absolute in the 1990s. Indeed, in many respects, as Solioz points out on page 39, when looking at Eastern Europe we find a long discussion on the “Return of…”: first, in the 1990s, the Return of Eastern Europe to Europe and the EU, then the Return of History with new questions about identity, borders, and belonging, and more recently, especially in Central Europe, the Return of the Nation as a fundamental political concept and framework for transition arrangements. It should be added, however, that in Southeastern Europe, like in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina—a country widely discussed by Solioz—and Serbia, which he mentions only occasionally, rather surprisingly for a book focused on the Balkans, the nation never went away. Political elites used nationalism as a tool of mobilisation to start and prolong the Yugoslav wars, and it continues to play a major role in Serbia’s relations with Kosovo. It is also at the root of Croatia’s continued interference in the internal affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina.
Solioz looks at the various transitions chronologically, giving a theme and a name to each of the three decades of post-Wall transition in Eastern Europe—indeed the book seems to encompass much more of Eastern Europe than the inclusion of the Balkans would suggest. He argues, for example, that since 2009 the countries of Central and Eastern Europe entered a new phase marked by deconsolidation and Europe's polycrisis (89). Trust in the EU has decreased, nationalist rhetoric is on the rise, and populist and authoritarian parties have seen substantial electoral success across Eastern Europe (as well as in Western Europe, which Solioz neglects to mention). This is a general feature of the book: at times, the reader follows Solioz's arguments with interest and is stimulated to think about similar transition processes and challenges in Western Europe, yet these links remain unexplored. Perhaps some of the changes in Eastern Europe and the challenges these societies have faced, as well as some of the political transitions of the last thirty years, are not as unique to the region as scholars have established, Solioz included.

Solioz concludes that the end of global American dominance, new shifts in the multipolar order, and the ongoing limitations of EU engagement with Southeastern Europe require the European Union to take a new approach towards the region (Chapter 8). Indeed, how the process of EU integration can result in successful and permanent transition for the EU membership candidates and potential candidate countries in Southeastern Europe remains a key challenge for the EU and its member states, as well as for the countries in this area.

The book is rich in information and data, and has comparative value. At times, the author jumps between cases and transition experiences, making it sometimes hard to follow his discussion of the effects of political transition in one country while comparing it to economic shifts in another. Solioz looks at a large number of states, from communist East Germany to the Central European states that joined the EU in 2004, and the successor states of Yugoslavia as well. He draws on a substantial number of sources in multiple languages. His book does not so much present completely new insights and findings but is more a summary of the uneven and contradictory developments observed in Eastern Europe: simultaneous processes of democratisation and de-democratisation, as well as challenges to the liberalism that was hailed in the region not so long ago. As such, it will be an important source for scholars and practitioners alike who want to understand not only where the region has come from and how it has got to where it is today, but also for those involved in shaping how Central and Eastern Europe could be in the future.