

Introduction

This book has the intention of revealing the recent political history of the Balkans. The region has received much attention during the last nearly thirty years: military conflicts, interethnic tensions, nation- and state-building and the slow process of Europeanisation granted a special status for the Balkans. The short 20th century started in Sarajevo with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and ended with Sarajevo's assault. The dissolution of Yugoslavia was a gradual process resulting in successive wars between Serbia and the other member states (Ten-Day War in Slovenia, war in Croatia between 1991 and 1995, war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992–1995 and the war in Kosovo with the mass involvement of NATO forces in 1998–1999). Some member states, like Macedonia (FYROM) and Montenegro managed to leave the federation without bloody conflicts. Almost at the same time as the dismemberment of Yugoslavia, ethnic tensions appeared in Bulgaria (in fact, they already appeared during the late Zhivkov era in the form of the name-changing campaign in 1984–1985 and the 'big excursion' in 1989) and Romania's mainly Hungarian-inhabited central region, in the Szeklerland. Nevertheless, these countries managed to avoid major conflicts.

Simultaneously, the majority of Balkan states had to face political transition from communist regimes to democratic ones. However, the corrupt and clientelistic power-holders (eventually relying on war rhetoric) slowed the process of the transition down in order to preserve their power; thus communist elites have remained integral parts of these countries after the regime change. This feature of the political history of the region shaped the entire transition process, which – coupled with other factors – resulted in weak democracies.

In line with the road to democracy, the local elites had to adopt new economic policies in order to support the integration of their respective countries into the more and more globalising world economy, beginning the slow process of EU integration. This policy change (switching from a planned economy to a free market) was accompanied by the bankruptcy of several state companies and the collapse of several sectors (especially mining and heavy industry), resulting in skyrocketing unemployment and social tensions. Thus, the 1990s demonstrated a great drama for the majority of the inhabitants of the countries under consideration in the form of wars, tensions, economic and social insecurities.

The instability and challenges led to even deeper social and demographic crises such as the sharp decline in fertility rates and mass emigration to Western Europe (and to a limited extent, in case of Muslims, to Turkey) which affected the social security and pension system and also weakened the basis of economic growth. The lack of workforce has become apparent by the mid-2010s in several countries undermining the possible economic catching up to the more developed core-EU countries, but even to the more developed Central European countries, as well.

After the war of Kosovo, the era of bloody conflicts was over in the region. Nevertheless, ethnic and social tensions still prevail as several unrests and riots demonstrated (in 2004

in Kosovo, in 2014 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 2015 in Macedonia). The global financial crisis hindered the process of catching up, aggravated social tensions and gave a new, fresh impetus to emigration to the West. In case of Greece, the country had to face a deep economic downturn resulting in mass unemployment, social tensions and strong reliance on EU support.

Despite the slow economic recovery of the 2010s, challenges have remained permanent. Perpetual corruption and clientelistic networks hinder the process of catching up. Due to corruption and the lack of real willingness to make reforms along with the internal political and economic difficulties of the EU, enlargement has also lost its momentum. The last country that managed to accede to the European Union was Croatia in July 2013. Even though every country in the region has the ambition to become a member, the accession process has virtually stalled. Under such circumstances, the importance of other actors, such as Russia and Turkey has started to grow, and their growing influence has received increased attention. However, in spite of their power projection, the European Union remains the focal point for the region.

Their importance to the EU has been demonstrated throughout the migration crisis in 2015–2016, when around one million refugees (mainly Syrians and Afghans) traversed the region towards Germany and Scandinavia. Although the EU has managed to conclude an agreement with Turkey (which is actually a declaration) and the Balkan road was closed by the transit states, this challenge had a major impact on Central European and Western European countries, undermining the cohesion of the EU and also revealing the weaknesses of the community.

In short, the states of the Balkan Peninsula went through a tremendous change since the end of the Cold War. While the Balkans have been associated with nationalism, violence and wars, backwardness and omnipresent corruption, the region also received major attention from the international (academic) community. Thus, the region offered a great number of case studies for Political Science researches.

Several comprehensive books have been published about the various aspects of politics in the Balkan states after the regime change and wars, like Tom Gallagher's volume,¹ or Robert Bideleux and Ian Jeffries's comprehensive work about the region.² Věra Stojarová and Peter Emerson's book³ on party politics has also provided an overview about political developments.

This book endeavours to present a broad overview about the main political changes in the region until 2018, giving an update about the most recent political developments. Thus, the time frame of the research covers nearly thirty years of democratic transition between 1989–1991 and 2018 (the only exception is the chapter on Greece, where the starting point is 1974, the collapse of the military junta). By doing so, it intends to reveal the differences between the various transition – and later on, democratisation – processes in the examined countries, the factors that shaped these processes and current challenges, as well.

¹ GALLAGHER 2005.

² BIDELEUX–JEFFRIES 2007.

³ STOJAROVÁ–EMERSON 2010.

This volume offers 10 country case studies and one chapter about the theoretical background (Transitology). The aim of the book is to portray the political trajectory of the countries in consideration from the process of regime change to the most recent developments. Consequently, the case studies all apply a similar structure: outlining the features of the fall of the communist regime, portraying the main transformations in the institutional background (constitution) and revealing the main features of the current political system.

The chapter about Albania, penned by Ilir Kalemaj, reveals why the expected rapid democratisation went wrong and how the antagonism between political actors slowed down the process. The prospects for EU-enlargement facilitated the transformation; however, the willingness of the political elite to implement substantial harmonisation packages is questionable.

Marin Lessenski gives an overview about the political developments in Bulgaria since the regime change. Although the country managed to overcome the interethnic tensions without major conflict (especially compared to the country's western neighbourhood), the slow process of economic, social and political catching up to the core-EU countries has given rise to displeasure.

The case of Croatia, outlined by Sandro Knezović, shows how the Homeland War and the semi-authoritarian regime slowed down the democratisation process and how the political elites made efforts to reach EU membership status. Thus, Croatia became a good example for the importance of the EU's transformative power in shaping political institutions.

The chapter devoted to portray the political history of Greece has a different time frame than the rest of the case studies in this volume. The author, Othon Anastasakis chose 1974 as the start for his analysis due to the domestic dynamics of the country being different from other Balkan states. After the unsuccessful unification attempt of Cyprus and Greece, the military junta ruling the country lost its power, opening the door to democratisation. Greece serves as a unique case in the region. As the author demonstrates, it had a different political trajectory than its northern neighbours did.

Jeton Mehmeti writes about the difficulties and challenges of the Kosovar state-building. Although the gradual institution building process evolving from international supervision to independence achieved a lot of goals, the chapter also points out the persisting challenges. The country, which has been recognised by more than one hundred countries since its declaration of independence in 2008, still faces several issues, e.g. corruption, poverty and weak rule of law.

In her piece, Jovana Marović outlines the democratic transformation of Montenegro. She analyses the factors that led to the DPS and its leader (Milo Đukanović) managing to retain power during the past thirty years and how the party adapted to the challenges emerging after 1990. Despite the efforts to accede to the European Union, the political elite of the country failed to increase institutional independence and the rule of law, making the prospective success for becoming a member state questionable.

Tibor Toró analyses the political history of the previous thirty years in the case of Romania. He portrayed the path dependency in Romanian politics stemming from the way democratic transition was realised in the country. He outlines three elements that played a crucial part in shaping the political system: the capture of state by post-communist elites in the early 1990s, the implementation of a semi-presidential system and the strong position of the executive with regards to the legislature.

In the chapters outlining the recent political history of North Macedonia and Serbia, Zoltán Egeresi attempts to provide an overview about the main political dynamics of these countries from the ethnic tensions to armed conflicts. He also describes the difficult road of transition as well as the evolution of the party and constitutional system.

Josip Lučev's chapter about Slovenia presents the successful case of transition, as Slovenia was able to create a stable democratic system and managed to avoid massive involvement in the Yugoslav War, resulting in rapid Europeanisation and successful accession to the EU as early as 2004. However, as Lučev argues, the economic crisis of 2008–2009, which resulted in recession, and subsequent slow recovery changed the political dynamics in the country.

In the introductory chapter, József Dúró gave a theoretical overview of Transitology and the applicability of theories in case of the Balkan states. He argues that due to various historical and social factors, the region requires a more diverse approach, as country-specific issues influenced the process of transition and later on the case of democratisation.

József Dúró and Zoltán Egeresi

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