Nikolaos Papakostas and Nikolaos Pasamitros, (eds.), An Agenda for the Western Balkans, From Elite Politics to Social Sustainability


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The Western Balkans, the countries of former Yugoslavia minus Slovenia plus Albania, had enjoyed their fair share of world attention in the past, as a result of the violence unleashed by the disintegration of Yugoslavia. More recently, the region has somehow returned to the headlines because it has come to provide the main corridor for the flow of refugees and immigrants from the Middle East and beyond towards Northern Europe.

The very term ‘Western Balkans’ is a neologism introduced by the jargon-loving EU bureaucracy to distinguish the region from the rest of the Balkans. Unlike Greece and, more recently, Bulgaria and Romania, the Western Balkans, with the exception of Croatia, have remained outside the EU. Therefore, for the Western Balkan countries the process of Europeanisation means all sorts of things, from the formal accession to the EU all the way to the modernisation of their economy, institutions and social attitudes.

In this sense, the agenda for the Western Balkans can be none other than the process of Europeanisation in all its various facets. As has been said previously, for the countries and the peoples of the Western Balkans, the EU is ‘the only game in town’. Nowhere is this more evident than in Serbia, a country which has been historically close to Russia and continues to entertain some russophile feelings and, at the same time, some real grudges against the West. Nevertheless, Serbia is as eager to join the EU as any other Western Balkan country.

The collective volume An Agenda for the Western Balkans builds on that fact in order to explore alternative paths to Europeanisation. These paths do not limit themselves to an often imported, top-bottom approach, that is at times implemented by an authoritarian state against a reluctant society and a quasi neo-colonial EU on the small Balkan ‘protectorates’. On the contrary, the paths under discussion try to better integrate the whole of society in the process.

The starting point of the project, as it is clearly stated in the editors’ introduction, is the frustration and fatigue felt with the policies followed so far. Indeed, while there has been no war in the region since the NATO-led extraction of Kosovo from Serbia in 1999, the Western Balkans continue to suffer from dysfunctional politics, anaemic growth and limited developmental prospects. Some countries, like Bosnia, are worse off today, in terms of per capita GDP, than in 1989. Many have lost their
brightest and most dynamic citizens, who have migrated abroad in search of a better life, away from societies where what counts the most is not what one knows but who one knows.

The contributors to the volume are young, talented and, certainly, ambitious scholars, brought together by two entrepreneurial editors from Greece, Nikolaos Papakostas and Nikolaos Pasamitros. They all appear impatient with the traditional and, often, failed thinking on the region. The result is a refreshing, colourful and, at times, thought-provoking publication that is a useful addition to the ever lengthening bibliography on the former Yugoslav lands. Topics range from the issue of democratisation and state building to that of a green economy, identity and memory politics, and, the role of the EU or China in the region. All papers are of a high academic quality, backed up by a myriad of footnotes and bibliographical references, although some are, as is always the case, more interesting than others. They all know what they are talking about and seem to understand the deeper logics that have been shaping Balkan history to this day.

There are two main problems with the book. The one has to do with the oversupply of soft, ‘anthropological’ approaches and topics to the detriment of some harder, ‘economic’ or ‘political scientific’ ones. The former are useful but one could have thought of a more balanced collection. It is quite an irony that a book that is so critical of Europe and its conventions, is, after all, so thoroughly European. It is hard to imagine über-positivist Americans writing a volume like this about any part of the globe.

The other problem, which is somewhat related to the former, is the sparsity of concrete, implementable policy proposals that could move the process forward towards the stated goal of sustainable Europeanisation. While criticism of existing policies and approaches is abundant in the book, much of it is justified and well deserved. When it comes to alternatives, the writing gets elusive and escapist. This is a pity because the authors had certainly the intellectual tools and talents to become more specific.

Nevertheless, the book is very much worth reading and not only by the specialist and the Balkan-maniacs but by anyone interested in European politics today. Of course, it should be read, first and foremost, in Brussels and in all the regional capitals, as the debate on what to do with the Western Balkans is being reignited. Obviously, the solution cannot be the erection of more fences as is the case today. Fences can only work if backed by deadly force. In such an eventuality, the European project, as we have known it, will be defeated and will give way to a Europe of a multitude of iron curtains.