

BOOK REVIEW

Nikolaos Papakostas and Nikolaos Passamitros (editors). 2015. *An Agenda for the Western Balkans: From Elite Politics to Social Sustainability*. Stuttgart: ibidem Press, 246p

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The book *An Agenda for the Western Balkans. From Elite Politics to Social Sustainability*, edited by Nikolaos Papakostas and Nikolaos Pasamitros, is a valuable, different-approach contribution to the analysis of Southeast Europe. The work of the authors represents, at the same time, a critical review of the previous research and an innovative, important, empirical and theoretical contribution to the topic of Western Balkans region dynamics and on the Europeanization process of these countries.

The book reunites ten articles that tackle highly sensitive topics for the region through elaborated and innovative theoretical approaches and relevant case studies. Among the hot topics, the most significant can be summed in: a problem-integratory agenda for the region; EU influence; enlargement and conditionality – embedded in: (b)ordering of the EU and the EU conditionality; local ownership and bottom-up policy-making; the reconstruction of cultural heritage and the rebuilding of perception of the region; international cooperation and green policy implementation; state-building, legitimization of power, democratization, and the sovereignty issue of Kosovo.

In the first part of the book – “An Agenda for Western Balkans - Foreword”, the editors contextualize and make a comprehensive introduction to the topic, establishing an agenda for the Western Balkans in the current regional, national and international circumstances, and frame a synopsis of the further analyzed subjects. In the second chapter – *The EU democratization and state-building in Kosovo: An analysis through the fragmented local agency*, Bilge Yabanci proposes an innovative debate for the region, revealing the

importance of considering the local-agency and the domestic dynamics factors in the democratization and state-building processes. In the third part of the book, *(B)ordering in the EU: Croatia's path toward becoming "European"*, Jennifer L. Titanski-Hooper structures the case-study research on the interesting framework of the (b)ordering concept. The article reunites the debates around the process of Europeanization, which are framed between the perspectives of geographic bordering and of the cultural, political and economic ordering. Stefan Četković, in *The challenge of promoting green sectors in Serbia: Between international demands, national controversies and sectoral struggles*, emphasizes the necessity of including the Needs Approaches into the macro accounts of policy-making and the Europeanization process. The article is a valuable contribution, due to the multi-level used analytical framework: political system, socio-economic setting and Europeanization policy. The book continues with the contribution of Miruna Troncota – *Still "waiting for Godot" in Sarajevo? Europeanization of Bosnia and Herzegovina – Between the contradiction of EU conditionality and local ownership*. The article problematizes, in a comprehensive analysis, the "never ending governance crisis" and the "blame game" of constitutional reform, within the two-fold explanatory factors: the role of the international community (represented by the EU) and the dynamics of the ownership reform. This contribution is also significant due to the fact that it underlines the necessity of step by step, trust-building activities between all stakeholders in order to achieve genuine policy change. The next study – *Macedonia: The consequences of the political focus on identity and how this affects the Balkans politics and the European integration process*, proposed by Nicholas Rossis, demonstrates that the identity policy and the use of history as a social proof deteriorated the democratic standards in Macedonia and counteracted the efforts that the country makes to move forward to sustainable policy making and Europeanization. In the seventh section of the book – *Reinventing the past: Politics of memory in the post-conflict reconstruction of cultural heritage in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Tonka Kostadinova approaches the critical issue of politics of memory – as collective and trans-national, the question of peaceful cohabitation of ethnics in Bosnia and Herzegovina and of collective memory as reification for the legitimization of power, in order for the region to be included in the European narrative. Anastas Vangeli's contribution – *On the growing cooperation between China and the Western Balkans*, gives a broader view of the Balkans region, in the context of international economic relations. The

author problematizes the potential of the Sino-Balkan cooperation to become anti-European, but concludes that the EU and China actors represent supplementary economic actors in the Western Balkans countries. It is further analyzed in *Statehood without sovereignty: risky negotiations in post-independent Kosovo*, by Alma Vardi-Kesler. The author proposes a new interpretation of the configuration of power in Kosovo through two theoretical models – the political opportunity structure and the collective action frames, reunited in the concept of bifurcated contention. It is emphasized that, taking into consideration the interaction between international authorities, state institutions and local collective actors is an essential step for new analytical and praxis solutions for the process of state-building. The last part of the book – *Western Europe, Western Balkans: Barriers to cross-cultural encounter*, written by Tom Phillips, using the “template” analysis of culture, focuses on the framework of stereotypes and misperceptions from which the West perceives the Balkans, despite the internal efforts of the countries to remove the bad image they inherited.

The importance of this volume is derived from the actuality of the debated topic, Western Balkans countries, from the perspective of European enlargement and the necessity of rethinking the internal policy-making process, in order to reach regional cooperation and internally-driven reforms. The book underlines the need for changing the strategies of policy-making from a top-down to a bottom-up approach, in order to solve the region’s endemic multi-dimensional problems. Nonetheless, the value of this work is also given by the fact that it questions, on specific case studies, the efficiency of the European Union’s top-down goal-oriented policies and its *modus operandi* in the region. The puzzle of the book is compounded, as the editors mention, on three interdependent criteria: images – of self and of the other; actorness – political solutions as not being free of reactions and the question of neutral involvement; and sustainability – the need for new cross-cutting and bottom-up approach reforms for the region.

As shown in the brief previous analysis, this study is a compelling unitary collection of multidisciplinary researches that focus on the “imagined region of the Balkans” and the Europeanization process from a new perspective. The book can be commended for its clarity, continuity and good organization. Therefore, *An Agenda for the Western Balkans. From Elite Politics to Social Sustainability*, edited by Nikolaos Papakostas and Nikolaos Pasamitros,

represents a multidisciplinary problem-identifying and solution-driven proposed agenda for the Western Balkans, which is indispensable for students, scholars and politicians interested in this “imagined region”.

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