

BOOK REVIEW

Dan D. Lazea. 2014. *Suveranitatea statelor si integrarea europeana a Balcanilor: cazul Serbiei* (The Sovereignty of States and the European Integration of the Balkans: The case of Serbia), Timișoara, Western University Publishing House, 257 pages, ISBN: 978-973-125-440-1.

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The present research is a most welcome addition to the fields of history and international relations alike, in an academic environment severely lacking regional studies related to the Balkans. Studying the Balkans is no easy task, as the subject is extremely complex and requires a thorough interdisciplinary approach.

For the last 20 years, since the war for the dissolution of Yugoslavia ended, the most important decisions in Balkan politics have been heavily challenged by history, international law, security, political theory and international affairs. As such, the Western Balkans region offers a series of critical case studies and contested concepts in these fields. And that is only if we take into account recent and contemporary history. The region has been more commonly studied as a space where borders have constantly moved back and forth, where the interests of the great powers have always met at more or less friendly crossroads and where the fate of the peoples have rarely been decided by themselves. And in the end, with the prospects of the European Union integration all the former Yugoslav republics have finally come to a point where they can move forward. This does not mean forgetting the past, but rather coming to terms with it. The events which took place in the region in the past few years give reason for optimism: Croatia and Albania, two of the Adriatic Charter countries' joined NATO, Croatia became an EU member state, Montenegro launched accession talks with the EU and last but not least Serbia received the much coveted EU candidate status and awaits the start of negotiations. Some, however, give further cause for caution. The recent events in Macedonia (FYROM), the constant unrest on Kosovo's northern

border with Serbia 7 years after the unilateral, but otherwise peaceful, proclamation of independence, as well as the ramifications of Islamic terrorism in places like Bosnia and Herzegovina, all against the background of rising nationalism and xenophobia in Western Europe, are troubling. Such an intricate combination of political phenomena represents a great intellectual challenge for a great number of scholars, and even more so especially for the ones from neighbouring countries. Nevertheless, the research on the Western Balkans is very limited in the Romanian academia and this should be underlined as the very first merit of Dan D. Lazea's book to start with - that it synthesizes the most important scholarly and policy debates in the field of EU integration in the Western Balkans and opens new focus points of reflection to the Romanian academia.

The author's analysis offers a very accurate understanding of this situation, as it focuses on the impact of Serbia's path to EU integration on the whole region. Prof. Lazea managed on the course of two sections with four chapters each to cover the topic of regional European integration using a mix of theoretical perspectives and data. By discussing some of the most widely used terms in international relations today, which also happen to be some of the most controversial terms to date - sovereignty and integration - the author uses the case of Serbia and its newly (re)found European path to discuss the perspectives for the country and the region in a wider EU and an interdependent world. In the first part of the study the main conceptual focus is the on debates around state sovereignty, minority policies and the tensions between identity and security in the EU. The analysis confirms that for at least the past 2 decades we have been discussing and moving around the same issues: the role of the international community in post-conflict states, the nation state and national sovereignty in the 20th and 21st century, the role of the EU, the US and Russia in the region, the importance of national minorities and their rights. This can only mean one thing: that there is still a great deal of "unfinished business" in the Balkans.

In his in-depth theoretical approach, the author summarizes a number of approaches and discusses the most important concepts in the realist theories of IR. For example, independence proclamation and statehood recognition within the limits of international law are key concepts for the understanding of IR from a realist perspective, whereas identity-building strategies can be better assessed through the theoretical lenses of social-constructivism. All in all, the discussion on sovereignty represents a valuable theoretical contribution in the field, showing the limits of the concept as seen from the realist and neo-realist

perspectives. In the final part of this section, the author applies both realism and constructivism to show how EU foreign policy instruments evolved in the case of Balkans from non-intervention (in the 90s) to political conditionality and membership negotiations (after 2000). Lazea suggests in this regard that both theoretical strands of thinking bring insights into the understanding of this intricate topic in complementary ways.

However, the main challenge for IR in general is the discrepancy it features between theory and practice. If from a theoretical point of view, the Balkans can be analysed, quantified or judged by one or another theory, in practice things are oftentimes fluid and rapidly changing, forcing decision-makers to quickly adapt, or even improvise. It has happened in the Balkans more than once in the past 20 years that international law was bent to its limits, not to say completely overlooked.

As far as Serbia is concerned, it is the case for the region and the EU and this is also what Lazea points out. Serbia's complicated recent history and constant internal political entanglements, the wide variety of open issues with most of its neighbours, and the normalized, yet frail, relationship between Belgrade and Pristina, are all hanging heavily in the balance. Even though it has a rather emotional connection to Russia as the author argues, Serbia has however made a rational choice when deciding to pursue the EU path against the odds of the political conditionality required, which in some cases may be regarded as surrendering national sovereignty. In the second section of the book, Lazea argues that the European integration process is the final test for Serbia's stability, a test for long-lasting regional stability, but also a milestone for the Union per se. In the final section, the author critically reflects on the level of pragmatic strategies and coherence shown by both Serbia and the EU in the recent negotiations. Finally, the study shows that as long as the country is still confronted with its own internal reforms, but having to keep the promise of "Thessaloniki 2003" alive and keep delivering on it, its success will prove that the EU is a regional and global actor that should be taken seriously.

In conclusion, the recent study of Dr. Dan D. Lazea *The Sovereignty of States and the European Integration of the Balkans: The case of Serbia* offers a valuable contribution to the scholarly debates focused on the Western Balkans in Romania. The book is a must-read for all graduate or postgraduate researchers and young scholars who take an interest both in the Balkans and in EU affairs.