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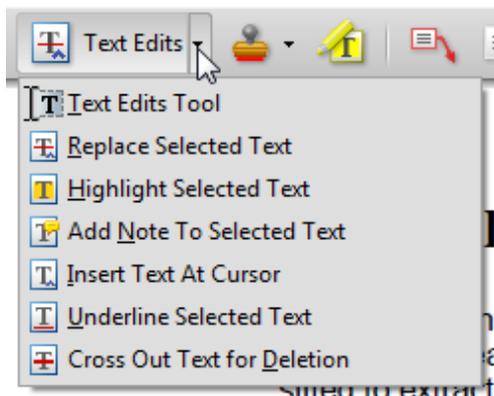
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# Book Review

Edited by PÄIVI OINAS

**Regional Transformation Processes in the Western Balkan Countries**, GYULA HORVÁTH and ZOLTÁN HAJDÚ (Eds), Centre for Regional Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Pécs (2011). 640 pp. No price given (hbk). ISBN 978 963 9899 37 7.

This edited volume is the outcome of a joint project between the Centre for Regional Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and an Italian Centre for Local Development: the OECD LEED Trento Centre.<sup>1</sup> It has an ambitious goal: to provide a comprehensive analysis of the spatial transformations of the ‘Western Balkan Countries’ – a new geographical label, shorthand for the countries emerging from the collapse of Yugoslavia in the 1990s plus Albania. This term is now widely used by academics, the press and some state officials because – with the exception of Slovenia – these are the only countries of South Eastern Europe that did not become part of the European Union following the enlargements of 2004 and 2007.

Besides representing a hole in the map of the European Union, differences among the Western Balkan countries overwhelm similarities. Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Kosovo emerged from the collapse of Yugoslavia. All except Macedonia were torn by wars in the 1990s; Albania had one of the most isolationist communist regimes in the world until the 1980s. By 2011, all these countries have some form of association with the European Union, but their perspectives and timing for full membership vary. In order to address the diversity of economies, political structures and societies in the region, this book includes the contributions of twenty-two academics, policy analysts and consultants. It is divided in five somewhat unevenly divided parts corresponding to the most important areas in which economies and societies have changed.

Part 1, ‘Effects of the Change of Regime’, discusses the broad transformations of the regions due to post-socialist transformation, Yugoslav wars and processes of accession of the European Union. The strength of this section is that it analyses state-building processes and geopolitical issues contextualizing recent events through a long-term historical perspective. I found the map on page 47 particularly fascinating: it depicts the stability of national borders in Europe, showing for how long different borderlines have remained stable, and thus illustrates the messiness of the Eastern part of

the continent. Part 2, ‘Demographic Processes and Labour Force’, discusses changing ethnic patterns following displacement during the wars in the 1990s, the ageing of the population, migration and employment patterns. The articles are rich in data and maps, and contextualize the specific conditions of the Western Balkans comparing them with European Union-wide trends. Part 3, ‘Environment and Settlement Network’, comprises chapters outlining the physical geography of the region, and the functions of cities in a long-term historical perspective. Part 4, ‘Political System, Public Services’, analyses governments and social exclusion, providing an insightful discussion of how socialism, post-socialism and European Union integration have dramatically reshaped the structures of sub-national administrations in the area. Part 5, ‘Economy’, analyses economic transition from multiple perspectives, ranging from industry, agriculture and banking to a discussion of economic crisis and entrepreneurship and local development.

The individual chapters fit closely with the themes of each part, and they are organized in a similar fashion: they first provide an overview of general trends in the region, and then most of them perform a country-by-country analysis; thus, the editors were successful in producing a coherent work. However, the quality of the individual contributions is highly uneven. Some of the contributions are merely organized collections of facts, which neither engage theoretical debates, nor provide sophisticated quantitative analyses. Some papers badly need English language editing. Other papers are much better written, and they provide relevant contributions to their respective literatures.

Among the – in my view – insightful and well-written contributions, Roberto Chizzali’s ‘Demographic transition’ compares demographic data (population pyramids, demographic transition, age pyramids, age-dependency ratios, fertility rates) of the region as a whole and of each country with the European Union averages. In doing so, it shows that, notwithstanding the wars, the lower levels of industrialization and regional diversity, the Western Balkans follow European trends. Elisa Campestrin and Emma Clarence’s ‘Employment and labour markets’ includes a detailed discussion of the consequences of the financial crisis on labour. Unexpected because of the relative isolation of the local financial markets, the crisis hit the area heavily because of the

reliance on foreign direct investments (FDIs) and remittances. Gábor Lux's 'The disintegration and reorganisation of industry in the Western Balkans' sheds further light on the economic conditions of the region, characterized by profound inequalities among countries and subregions, lack of political and financial capital to steer comprehensive reforms, deindustrialization and tertiarization. Zoltán Gál's 'The banking sector of the Western Balkans' further analyses the consequences of the crisis in the banking sector, highlighting the heavy reliance on FDIs, which will not likely increase for several years. However, the banking sector as a whole has experienced growth, and also improvements in stability. Nevertheless, systemic risk is still high because of household debts financed by foreign currency loans.

Overall, the book engages debates on economic transition and post-socialism, but misses the opportunity of addressing theoretical issues on Europeanization, Balkanism, Orientalism and geopolitics. For example, there is no reference to the work of BALIBAR (2004) on transnationalism and Europe, of TODOROVA (1997) on the construction of the Balkans, or of WOLFF's (1994) and NEUMANN's (1999) work on the othering of Eastern Europe. This book also misses an explicit engagement with critical geopolitics, for example with the work of Gerald Toal and Carl Dahlman (TOAL and LUKE, 1994; DAHLMAN and TOAL, 2005).

In conclusion, the book only partially meets its goal, because its engagement with theory is often too thin, and because the quality of contributions is uneven. However, some of the papers are rich in data and insights, and are valuable readings for graduate students approaching the region for the first time, as well as for

more seasoned geographers, sociologists and political scientists interested in post-socialist transformation and Europeanization.

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#### NOTE

175

1. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED).

180

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200

205

210

215

220