

Florian Bieber. *The rise of authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2019. 155 pp.

Much of the academic literature on the Western Balkans focuses on the wars of the 1990s and accompanying nationalism. Newer trends in this region remain in the shadow of the bloody fall of Yugoslavia and current developments in other parts of Europe. *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans* is a five-chapter teleological study of the trends that swept the region in the last decade, reflecting the stagnation of democracy. It opens with a ten-point ironic guideline for a fictitious (or not) Balkan Prince, written in 2015. Fast-forward a few years, and it is still topical and popular. “You can only rule if you claim to be a democrat in favor of EU integration, but you can only continue your rule for a long time by not acting on these claims”(x) Bieber writes, giving an insight into the rest of the book in only one sentence.

Bieber points out the link of the two words, “Balkans” that has a negative connotation and reminds of the Balkanization and Balkanism, and the word “Western” which is supposed to signify progressiveness and modernity. He provides the context by familiarizing the reader with the main occurrences from the 1990s, with a focus on the rise of semi-authoritarian rule and waves of democratization that were never in full swing, and moves on to analyze the recent events. The reader is often reminded that there is no “one size fits all” approach when it comes to the autocratic rule in the region, and the differences in democratic backsliding are explained by a detailed analysis of each Western Balkan country.

Rewarding is the chapter in which the author shifts away from traditional and well established authoritarian theories and meticulously distinguishes seven different types of autocratic rule, from *continuity and change from within* the Montenegrin ruling party that has not changed since 1990, to Serbian *return to semi-authoritarianism* with the coming to power of current president in 2012. Furthermore, he points out that a long-term international involvement in Kosovo led to *authoritarianism under international patronage* where the elites retained power by dint of external support and that the new semi-authoritarian regime in North Macedonia was triggered by the Greek veto on NATO membership. The decentralization of political scene in Bosnia

and Herzegovina does not mean pluralization, but rather *ethnocratic authoritarianism*, while the *structural polarization* in Albania is based on two major differences between two established parties (neither of which is ideological): their relation to the Communist Party and a geographic support along north-south lines. Finally, Croatia went through the semi-authoritarian rule. It has not gone back to it, but it marks the rise of illiberalism with a conservative and nationalist trend, which Bieber calls *conservatism without authoritarianism*.

Especially insightful is the chapter on *Mechanisms of Authoritarianism* in the region, which draws on mechanisms of rule developed by Bieber in his previous work. It draws attention on various features of the new competitive authoritarianism, a system in which formal democracies are confronted with the challenge of keeping the power. In other words, a system combines formal democracy with informal authoritarianism. Among seven of these mechanisms is the production of constant state of crisis (illustrated by the train incident between Serbia and Kosovo in 2017, and the bilateral name dispute between North Macedonia and Greece), and external legitimacy (when the minister of foreign affairs of Austria took part in a North Macedonia's ruling party rally or when Serbian president Vučić had a bilateral meeting with chancellor Merkel right before Serbian elections). Another mechanism is re-establishment of loyal media, explained through a transfer of media ownership from foreign investors to companies close to the regime, the use of tabloids, and different stages of media polarization through the region.

The volume closes with an Epilogue, a ten-point guide for those who seek to replace the Balkan Prince, with the remark not to use the inherited power for personal advantage, no matter how tempting that might be. This, too, was written by Bieber in 2015. By the time the book was published, the only Balkan Prince to lose power was North Macedonian Nikola Gruevski, who sought refuge under the wing of another Prince, Victor Orban (145).

The significance of the *Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans* lies in the fact that it provides a new and fresh insight into the recent occurrences in the region, stimulates discussion of these complex processes, and offers a thought-provoking and well-documented analysis of processes even in academically marginal parts of Europe (Montenegro and North Macedonia). This interesting and engaging volume is an essential read for scholars in political science and college students, as well as for the policy makers and journalists whose work is focused on the Western Balkans.

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