Robert C. Austin, *Making and Remaking the Balkans: nations and states since 1878*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019). $34.95, IBSN 978-1-4875-0469-4

James C. Pearce
University of Liverpool
Department of History

One of Europe’s least understood regions (by Western Europeans) and so often called ‘the periphery’, The Balkans are anything but peripheral in the European story. Like much of Europe today – including Russia – The Balkans seems unable to break from its past, making undeniable gains accompanied by huge setbacks.

Robert C. Austin provides a readable and concise account as to why. After a brief introduction detailing the nineteenth century’s empire and nationalist musings up to communism’s collapse, Austin correctly highlights how no Balkan state, including non-communist Greece, was prepared for what lay ahead post 1989 (p.36). Maintaining social peace through the introduction of consumerism had a high price, as harsh austerity and new authoritarian regimes followed. From the most open (Yugoslavia) to closed (Albania), each experienced brain drains, kleptocracy, corruption, history wars, outright disappointment, and in some cases, war. Unlike Berlin, Prague or Budapest, the Balkans never got its ‘1989 moment’ (p.64), meaning the fundamental break with its past needed to chart a new course never occurred.

Chapter 2 explores the dissolution of Yugoslavia following violence that marked the beginning of a new era in the Balkans. Chapter 3, ‘Hero-Free Wars and Ethnic Purity’, examines the wars triggered by Slobodan Milošević’s pan-Serbian agenda in Bosnia, Croatia and Slovenia and the atrocities committed, where the Dayton Peace Accord is also scrutinised and brought into question. Chapter 4, ‘Albania Implodes, Kosovo Arms’, fixates on Kosovo as the end point of the dissolution of Yugoslavia and its importance for Serb identity. Belgrade’s oppression of Albanians in Kosovo, the 1998–1999 war and Albania’s inability to aid Kosovo due to its own internal failures are all explored, as is NATO’s often questioned intervention in the conflict. Chapter 5, ‘Contested Heroes: Alexander the Great, Mother Teresa, and the Republic of Macedonia’, examines the nature of Macedonian identity in the backdrop of a balancing act; political and linguistic representation for the Albanians (the largest minority), whilst disputing with Greece over using the historical name ‘Macedonia’.

This book’s strengths lie in its easy-to-read prose and frankness about the problems faced by the region, be it borders, ethnicity or the widescale corruption continuing to hold it back. Austin’s many unique and eyewitness accounts also add value to this text, as well, yet this is not an academic book; it lacks footnotes and engagement with the wider literature. Moreover, Austin never provides a clear definition of ‘The Balkans’. Whilst much of his focus is on the yet to join the European Union (‘the western Balkans’), particularly Albania, he tries to take an inclusive approach, still including Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria throughout. Whilst handled relatively well, it creates some contradictions and oversimplifications throughout.

The stand-out chapter is its final (six), ‘To Europe for Some: Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia’. I attended a conference on ‘Europe and the Balkans’ at the Northern Macedonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosted by the American University in 2018. Slovenia’s first President, Milan Kucan, told the audience (and I paraphrase), ‘’current candidate states [in the Balkans] stand little to gain from membership.’’ Meanwhile, a friend and colleague, Marina Andeva’s response to an audience member’s question was ‘‘what is Macedonia going to do if it *doesn’t* join the EU?’’ Both responses combined with what happened in Bulgaria and Romania after EU membership are precisely the point Austin ends on in his epilogue: whether Balkan states join the EU or not, they are still somewhat alone in Europe.

Since the early 2000s, the lure of EU membership hoped to be sufficient enough in ensuring reform in the region (p.154). The Council of Europe thought instigating the Balkans’ cultural ‘return to Europe’ would result in a more ‘European’ perspective. And yet, in 2014, a blockbuster year for Western Balkan states joining, came the drone incident at a Serbia vs Albania football match. Even though Greece accepted Macedonia’s name change, Greeks remain opposed to usage of the term *Macedonia* and are not so favourable to the compromise. The Albanian language now has an equal status in Northern Macedonia, yet Albanians are far from viewed as equals.

*Making and Remaking the Balkans* is useful and insightful for anyone new to or interested in the region, particularly undergraduates of business and public policy. Carrot and stick games from external forces (notably the EU and Russia) of rescinding visa-free travel and investment and continue to surround the long-standing and unresolved local issues. Although much progress has been made in the Balkans, less has changed than one might think!