

Book Review of 'Embracing Democracy in the Western Balkans: From Post-Conflict Struggles toward European Integration' by Lenard J. Cohen, John R. Lampe

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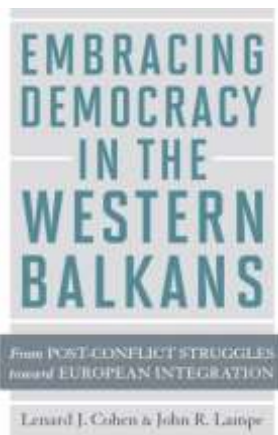
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Book:

Authors: Lenard J. Cohen, John R. Lampe

Title: „*Embracing Democracy in the Western Balkans: From Post-Conflict Struggles toward European Integration*”

Publisher: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, Washington, D.C., The Johns Hopkins University Press, U.S.A.

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Insights Into the Political Conditions in the Western Balkans

Book Review

Stefan Janković

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Understanding of complex social processes that took place in the Balkans in the past two decades is inseparable both from the specificities of the conflict in former Yugoslavia and the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe. One such attempt, especially aimed at the prospects of building democracy in the light of these processes is the study “*Embracing Democracy in the Western Balkans*”, written by Lenard Cohen and John Lampe.

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The aim of this study is a comparative evaluation of democratic consolidation in the states created by dissolution of Yugoslavia and Albania, respectively, consideration of these countries potentials and the Western Balkans as a whole, to establish democratic orders after the (armed) conflict. Authors perceive democratic consolidation as a possible counterweight to the authoritarian regression, teleologically binding the process of consolidation with that of generating stability, certainty and continuity of the democratic order. From a specific analytical perspective, democratic consolidation is viewed as the historically conditioned process of transformation from an authoritarian legacy of socialism towards joining the European Union, through the development of institutional framework of pluralism and liberal democracy, based on the dispersion of power and of a broader legitimacy.

These processes have been observed historically through a relatively flexible theoretical matrix, giving this study a socio-historical character. This matrix, although mostly implicitly shown, is conceptually grounded on fundamental postulates of the modernization theory, especially on Lipset's thesis, according to which democratization is closely related to the broader transformational, modernizing processes. Certainly, it is about perceiving social changes and development through the institutionalization of political pluralism, introduction of a multiparty system and creation of administrative efficiency at the political level, then market deregulation and de-etatisation on the economic and detraditionalization of value frameworks on a cultural level. Cohen and Lampe also pay attention to the modernization aspects on social level, like strengthening of middle class, development of civil society, independent media, etc., which are also taken as relevant for the construction of democracy. These aspects of modernization represent specific indicators, whose changes toward assumed model are taken as general evaluative framework of democratic consolidation process.

Through qualitative analysis, which includes a total of nine chapters, authors are demonstrating both prudence with generalizations and analytical sensitivity in detecting nuances, especially in recognition of differences in the trajectories of separate states. On the other side, certain problems occur on the empirical level, due to extensive reliance on news sources and uncritical approach to the data sources. Such approach, combined with the use of data obtained from public opinion surveys, potentially remains on the expressive and manifest plane, excluding deeper insights into broader practices of actors and their underlying dispositions. However, the diversity of used empirical data shows an overall adequacy for highlighting of particular aspects of democratic consolidation.

Despite the complexity and multifaceted nature of these processes, some key findings of overall democratic consolidation process in the region can be found, due to the synchronous comparison between states. Thus authors, not retaining on the normative level, recognize that changes after the collapse of socialism and the conflict in the 1990's, were limited in character and represented only a partial pluralisation that was still burdened by political and economic constraints of earlier period. These limitations were related both to the continuity of elite and previous institutional practices and also with the lack of broader political participation. Only after the end of conflict, political changes and the inclusion of the EU around 1999/2000, the democratic consolidation in the Western Balkans has been intensified. Significant improvement was a reflection of economic growth and institutional transformation, that also brought changes in key social segments of democratization, primarily in strengthening of the middle class and civil society.

Although the first decade of the 21st century brought notable progress, authors are concluding that, in addition to the differences between the states, instability in the consolidation process does not represent a sustainable democratic basis. On the internal level, states continue to face with administrative weaknesses, value inconsistencies and problems with reduction of the budget deficit and establishing a stable economic growth based on employment in the light of the global financial crisis. Authors especially

emphasize this external factor as its effects, in the form of increasing poverty and deteriorating position of the middle class, may consequently jeopardize the process of democratic consolidation. As a result, the general basis of stable democracies in the Western Balkans is undoubtedly established, but its "finalization" is conditioned by transformational characteristics of individual countries and external factors, such is the speed of EU integration.

Overall, these claims seem to be coherent, due to which this study provides important insights into the political conditions in the Western Balkans. However, its substantive problem is at the conceptual basis, that is, with the assumptions employed for evaluation of this phenomena. The universalization and taking one cultural model as a reference, liberal democracy in this case, greatly undermines the objectification of explanation. This is particularly evident with the modernization theory assumptions: despite the authors' awareness that the process may not necessarily be linear in character, such model evaluation reflects the conceptual background and desirable vision of society and indirectly brings teleological necessity. This kind of approach is problematic not only because the implementation of assumed model does not have the same effect as in the socio-historical context from which originates, but primarily because of the absence of (causal) explanation of the genesis of this transformation. Related to this is the relative primacy of internal factors within the theory of modernization which distorts the role of external structural and cultural constraints. Therefore, the causes of these processes must be viewed from a different standpoint – as an adaptation to altered global relations after the collapse of socialism, or as the establishment of cultural domination by certain geopolitical entities. Precisely because of these objections, this book can be a powerful stimulus for debate, on both theoretical problems and transformational processes in the Balkan states.