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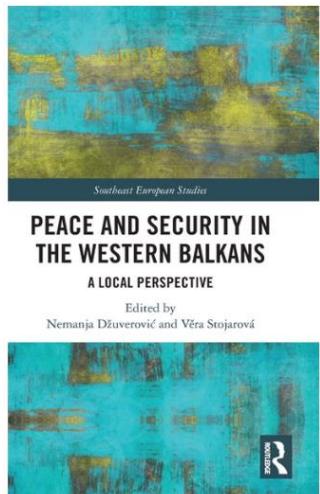
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Review

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## **BALKAN INSIGHTS: A GRASSROOTS APPROACH TO PEACE AND SECURITY\*\***



Nemanja Džuverović and Věra Stojarová.  
2023. *Peace and Security in the Western Balkans: A Local Perspective*. London:  
Routledge, p. 309.

For many years, there hasn't been a book dedicated to security in the Western Balkans

that captivates with its research seriousness and the importance of the topic for understanding historical events, particularly from the 1990s to the present, as well as contemporary geopolitical processes. At the same time, the book's impressive volume and extensive use of reliable sources make it deserving of respect. The aim of this book is to address the lack of attention given to the interdependent nature of the region and how the various challenges and threats to peace and security are linked. It offers detailed and in-depth analyses of each country in the region.

Notwithstanding, what contributes to the uniqueness of this book is the fact that it was written by experts from the Western Balkans, with the contribution of experts whose research fields are strongly engaged in this region. Another peculiarity is its approach to studying the Western Balkans by using the scalar turn and politics of scale from human and political geography instead of traditional methods. The scalar turn defines scales as socially constructed areas where social, political, and economic relationships are contested and are created through social practices. Scales are constantly changing and involve different actors, powers, resources,

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and political opportunities. By using this approach, the complicated political reality and struggles between various actors in the Western Balkans can be better understood.

The book is divided into three sections, each of which analyzes security from different angles. The first section, focused on the local level, comprises case studies that examine each country in the Western Balkans region in detail. The second section focuses on a regional comparison of the various political, economic, and social dynamics within the region. The third section examines the role of the most active foreign actors in the Western Balkans, starting with the US, EU, Russia, China, the Arab world, Turkey, and Iran.

In order to provide a comprehensive overview of security in the region, articles covering political and societal security, military security, economic security, and environmental security are included to broaden the scope of analysis. This approach ensures that all aspects of security are taken into account and evaluated, resulting in a more complete understanding of the security landscape in the region.

The authors have clearly stated that the Western Balkans region is a highly intricate research area, owing to its multifaceted history of armed conflicts, political instabilities, and economic crises, which have

been compounded by attempts to establish a post-conflict society. These efforts have been influenced by a diverse range of internal and external actors, adding to the already complex nature of this region. Therefore, to conduct a scholarly investigation into the Western Balkans, it requires a comprehensive understanding of the intricate and dynamic factors that shape its social, political, and economic landscape.

For over thirty years, the Western Balkans region has experienced the harmful effects of state collusion with organized crime. Supported by a myriad of examples, the authors concluded that this predicament emerged due to state involvement in armed conflicts, international sanctions, isolation, corruption, and the challenge of supplying markets through official channels.

Among numerous challenges, one of the biggest stumbling blocks is the unfinished transition, which started in the 1990s but has never been completed. Since then, the transition has represented a real burden for the entire region, resulting in a democratic backslide and an authoritarian rise. The political situation in the Western Balkans is also reflected in the state of their national economies, which continue to face structural challenges such as political instability, the prevalence of organized crime, societal tolerance of corruption, and the issue of youth

unemployment, which has also contributed to citizen dissatisfaction. Together, these factors have led to severe problems such as nationalist and radical political movements, the emergence of radical Islamism, widespread emigration, and brain drain.

This book convincingly demonstrates that Western Balkan politics has been controlled by ethno-nationalist parties since the 1990s, which focused on promoting their nationalist agendas and dominating social and political discussions. This hinders the process of post-conflict reconciliation and the establishment of a peaceful and positive society. The absence of reconciliation and trust, as stated in many sections, is the root cause of inter-ethnic tensions in all countries of the Western Balkans. However, it's important to acknowledge that each country in the region is responsible for ensuring the security and stability of the others.

Conflicting historical narratives, collective grievances, and a poor economic situation drive community vulnerability in each Western Balkan country, particularly in Serbia, where far-right nationalism and Islamist extremism coexist. The wars of the 1990s played a major role in shaping the Serbian far-right, while the status of Kosovo\* remains a focal point of far-right activities. The state has largely neglected the issue of preventing and countering extremism,

leaving it to the civil society sector, which lacks a holistic strategy. What fuels extremism is the prolongation of the situation in Kosovo\* and the lack of political reforms that could prevent or at least mitigate further radicalization in the region.

Besides radicalization, Bosnia and Herzegovina faces multiple challenges, including political conflict, corruption, organized crime, independence, and the impartiality of the judiciary. The ethnic structure of the country perpetuates political divisions, creating gridlock in the internal system of governance that spills over into BiH's international relations. Therefore, BiH has complex relations with Kosovo\* and Serbia, with Russia supporting secessionist tendencies in Republika Srpska and investing in the energy sector to increase its political influence. While China is trying to establish itself in key economic areas, Turkey and the Gulf states tend to be intertwined through cultural and religious activities. State capture by ruling elites that manipulate every aspect of life in BiH has resulted in political and economic stagnation, leaving room for foreign powers to expand their influence.

A bit more positive circumstances are in place in the case of Albania, which is noticeable through its efforts to become a security provider and its reliance on alliances with the US and EU. The country isn't an

exception when it comes to internal insecurities such as crime, drug trafficking, and terrorism and is working with international organizations to combat these issues. However, the focus on external threats may come at the expense of addressing acute domestic needs and emergencies. There is a risk of prioritizing security over citizens' rights, which is used to maintain political power.

The criminal interplay between business, politics, and crime, political polarization, and right-wing radicalization pose threats to peace in North Macedonia. Despite these challenges, local communities that have coexisted peacefully for years continue to do so, suggesting that ordinary citizens are the "carriers of peace" in the country. This is in contrast to political parties and state institutions, which often prioritize their own interests over the stability and safety of citizens. The recent history of the country has shown that control over the security apparatus highlights the danger of a captured state. While a majority of citizens report feeling satisfied with their personal security, there is still a need for state institutions to fulfill their roles and ensure the safety of all citizens. Foreign malign influences, particularly from Russia, Turkey, and China, also pose a threat to stability.

It is worth mentioning that the article focusing on Kosovo\* was written by non-Balkan experts, which gives this part additional academic value as its base is pure objective and high-quality analysis. With its non-fully recognized independence, it seems that Kosovo\* faces the most complex situation in the region. Kosovo\* is still perceived as a threat to Serbia's national values and interests, and it is hardly imaginable that it would be accepted as a neighboring country with shared aspirations of joining the EU. NATO's presence through KFOR is crucial for Kosovo's\* security, but the ongoing dispute with Serbia over territorial integrity and statehood creates uncertainty and risks for the entire region. Besides territorial integrity and sovereignty, Kosovo's\* security concerns include violent extremism and radicalization in the northern part, accompanied by political tensions as well as economic insecurity due to unemployment and a perceived lack of opportunities, which contribute to emigration and brain drain.

While Montenegro also shares common threats with other countries in the region, it is specific to the fact that national security has been shaped by the interests of one political elite for more than three decades, which has led to a society divided by political, ethnic, and social tensions. Montenegro's inter-

ethnic tensions pose the most significant threat to societal security, with unresolved identity divisions leading to a boom in nationalistic rhetoric. Montenegro also has a quite bad reputation for its organized criminal groups, which are well-known for smuggling drugs, weapons, and cigarettes, which could affect neighboring countries' political stability. Besides a thorough and overarching, in-depth analysis of each country, the authors have offered an overview of regional security. The second section of the book discusses the military and security developments in the Western Balkans since the 1990s conflicts. The evolution of that sector is presented through three phases: the stabilization phase, the consolidation phase, and the backsliding phase, emphasizing all the endeavors that have been taken to improve security, from peace agreements to democratic reforms and relapses of tension. Poverty and weak institutions threaten the economic security of the Western Balkans as well. Regional economic integration has been established to deepen cooperation and build trust, but it has been criticized for being non-transparent and not contributing to member states' welfare. On the other hand, climate change, pollution insecurity in supply chains demand greater regional coordination and an understanding of the environmental and socio-economic factors that address these challenges.

In the entire book, it is noticeable that the authors need to point out that in the Western Balkans region, international and local agents do not share the same perceptions of the meaning of peace and security. External actors have been increasingly dominant in developing peacebuilding public discourses in the region, expanding far beyond their initial roles at the time of the ceasefire and evolving into all-encompassing peace and state-building processes. Therefore, the evolution of peacebuilding developments in the region is predominantly characterized by coercion and manipulation, neglecting the empowerment of local ownership and blocking the prospect of an efficient stabilization of democracy. Finally, it is inevitable to mention that the special value of this book is the presentation of four strategic scenarios that will affect the peace and security of the Western Balkans and a recommendation to ensure long-term peace and security. It is necessary to achieve a final resolution regarding Kosovo's\* status, establish political agreements for inter-ethnic relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and

prevent any possible escalation of an arms race.\*

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