Review - Hunger and Fury: The Crisis of Democracy in the Balkans

Hunger and Fury: The Crisis of Democracy in the Balkans
By Jasmin Mujanović
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The end of the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001) marked a significant shift from direct conflict to 'negative peace' (absence of direct conflict) in the Balkans region. However, the current 'border correction' negotiations going on between Serbia and Kosovo adumbrates the complexity of bringing about a 'positive peace' in the Balkans. The coercive power of the state, the crisis of parliamentary regimes in the region and economic policies rooted in kleptocracy underline the fact that genuine democratization is still a distant dream in Southeastern Europe.*Hunger and Fury: The Crisis of Democracy in the Balkans* encapsulates this complex politics and economics which has been shaped by the fog of war but is being contained now by the fog of peace. It examines the failure of the Euro-Atlantic project to alter the structural dimensions of creeping authoritarianism and bring about participatory democracy in the region.

Jasmin Mujanović labels the current/modern political discourse in the Balkans as 'elastic authoritarianism' (the process of persistent ideological mutation contrasted with static political and economic patterns, through which local elites have deliberately stunted social transformation processes in the Balkans since the nineteenth century) (p. 2). This discourse has impacted the socio-political and economic development of the region as a whole. It would not be changed by the current democratization efforts of Western powers (expecting elites to abandon their recalcitrant authoritarianism) since the state and political development in southeastern Europe has been markedly different from the development of institutions in the West (p. 4). To prevent direct conflict, the EU and other western powers have accepted a 'stable instability' of this patrimonial system (p.105) leading to the creation of what can be termed as a 'stabilocracy'. A real transformation in the Balkans can only be envisioned with a growing civil society, which is currently in its nascent form.

In *Hunger and Fury*, Mujanović substantiates two broad arguments. The first argument is about the crisis of democracy in the Balkan region and the failure of the Western state building and democratization project based on elite-focused approaches to institutional creation (p. 3). The second argument advanced is that the future of the Western Balkans will be defined by a clash between patrimonial elites and a growing civil society and social movements. The elites consider the political reforms as unnecessary and undesirable because it will dismantle the patronage and clientelist networks that have persisted through 'seismic historical transformations' across different regimes and rules (p. 100). Citizens consider the reforms to be necessary to guide the region towards genuine democracy, development and self-rule.

The book consists of two broad themes spread over four chapters apart from the introduction and the conclusion. The first two chapters examine the main reasons for the crisis of democracy in the Balkans, rooting it in the region's complex history. The focus is to lay the foundation of the emergence and evolution of the state in the Balkans and the role that elites have played from the Ottoman Empire to contemporary times. It is pertinent to draw these linkages as Mujanovic argues that the region's development has been marred by its elites, who sought to preserve features of the

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imperial regime and not reform it for their own benefits (p. 12). The second part of the book consisting of the other two chapters comprises of the effects of the re-emergence and renewal of 'elastic authoritarianism' as a defining feature of contemporary Balkans politics. It also deals with the sporadic and scattered manifestations of dissatisfaction expressed by the embryonic and marginalised civil society being marginalised. This is illustrated by looking at the emergence of mass movements in Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia. The case studies portray the positive transition of the region from a 'politics of ethnicity and state-building' to a 'politics of dignity and agency 'and 'people power' (p. 14).

Deriving from the theoretical underpinnings of Sheldon Wolin's (1996) work on "Fugitive Democracy" and Martin Breaugh's (2013) work on the plebes, the book calls for a participatory redefinition of democracy in particular and politics as a whole in the region. It argues that sustained agitation and advocacy can produce revolutionary changes in the otherwise stagnant region which is becoming 'a social time bomb with a short fuse' (p. 125). Critiquing elastic authoritarianism and kleptocracy, Mujanović urges the international community and the people to participate in the reform of the political process (p. 135). Without this, the expedient and elusive illusion of liberal democracy that needs to be materialised in the region will be a far cry leading to hunger and fury. This would be disastrous for the region in particular and Europe in general since non-democratic powers are hustling for influence in the Western Balkans along with the rise of the extreme right and political populists within Europe. Norpert Mappes-Niedick (2017) rightfully accords that "Europe is the powder keg and the Balkans is the fuse" (p. 107).

Hunger and Fury is an authoritative account of the Balkans weaving lot of threads together from history to the contemporary state of affairs. It offers a historically informed analysis arguing that the present cannot be understood without the historical context and that the current situation can best be examined by drawing lessons from Balkan history. Mujanović accords that economic criminality of the 1980s, the war crimes of the 1990s and the contemporary corruption in the western Balkans should be understood as points along the same continuum (p. 65). By examining these crucial linkages, the readers would be able to draw convergences in the role of Balkan elites navigating across different regimes and distinct historical periods including the current period. The aim is to provide an advanced theoretical survey of Balkans history and make it a foundation to promote democratization and reform processes in the region.

Mujanović's book is an original and fresh intervention into the contemporary literature on Balkans region since it offers both pessimistic and optimistic insights into the Balkans. It is pessimistic since it gives a vivid description of the gloomy history of the region but optimistic in the sense that democratic consolidation might be on its way even though in its embryonic form. It reflects a fervid desire to transform the discourse on the region from tragedy to possibility (p. 14), creating a vibrant space of substantive and political contestation and substantive democratization (p. 3). The lucid and straightforward narrative will keep the reader engrossed in the text which is informative and academic without being insipid. It is a must-read for scholars interested in the Balkans region in general but also for scholars of peace and conflict studies, IR and political science especially to understand the role of elites in decision making (halting).

References

Breaugh, Martin, *The Plebeian Experience: A Discontinuous History of Political Freedom* , NewYork: Columbia University Press, 2013, p. xv.

Wolin, Sheldon, "Fugitive Democracy" in Seyla Benhabib,*Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 31.

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