Bechev, Dimitar. 2011. *Constructing Southeast Europe: The Politics of Balkan Regional Cooperation.* **Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 232 pp., £63.00**

Not many people would readily associate the term "Balkans" with "cooperation", "interdependence" or "collective action", for this term still carries the burden of negative context related to the conflicts from the beginning of the 1990s. Is it, nonetheless, possible to believe that countries that constitute this region have managed to overcome their antagonisms? What are the forces that are pushing them towards cooperation? What is the construction of South East Europe based on? These are some of the key questions that Bechev is attempting to answer in this book.

Explaining the course of regional cooperation, the author endeavors to identify both the driving forces and the areas of cooperation since the 1990s. Bechev offers an analysis of the functional and security interdependence, the effects of external actors and, finally, a connection between the Balkan regionalism and the identity politics. He then proceeds to examine the three most significant areas of cooperation: economy, security and politics, attempting to establish the motivators for cooperation depending on the specific contexts in which the actors happen to find themselves.

Bechev claims that researchers had already approached the issue of regionalism from different perspectives and that their one commonality was that they all considered interdependency a key factor pushing for collective action. He argues that geography plays an important role in the creation of this interdependency and explains it through the concept of Buzan's "regional security complex". The Yugoslav conflict had been a key trigger for new regional dynamics and the author analyzes the functional aspects of interdependence in the Balkans by ascertaining the lack of economic and trade cooperation that had been caused by the region's extensive economic fragmentation, inadequate infrastructure and the influence of EU. The problem of inadequate or non-existing infrastructure, along with the fact that the Yugoslav wars changed the pattern of regional transport and energy trade, actually forced the countries to cooperate more extensively in the areas of transport and energy. Providing an analysis on economic cooperation in the second chapter of the book, Bechev states that since Balkan countries were all committed to EU integration, the commitment to cooperation legitimized the external initiatives while simultaneously limiting the states' abilities to create their own institutional designs.

Unlike that of the trade, the dynamic of the regional security made the region look like a

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single geopolitical space. European reminiscence of the turbulent history of the Balkans made it interfere in an attempt to pacify the region through the encouragement of regional cooperation. This was done under the assumption that the Yugoslav crisis represented a part of a wider regional puzzle; instead, it proved to have consisted of a number of small contained conflicts rather then a single big one. Following the conclusion of the conflicts, the real problems of the region became transnational organized crime, human trafficking, corruption, the influx of refugees and migration. All these issues extended beyond what the individual countries were capable of coping with on their own; as a result, they tried to cooperate amongst themselves as well as with interested external actors. Exploring the area of security cooperation, Bechev shows that even though regional institutions and initiatives have indeed emerged as part of NATO and EU integration tendencies, the desire of the governments to shed their respective negative images created in the 1990s remained the truly important factor.

Bechev also offers a wide historical background of international interventions in the Balkans. Denoting the US, NATO and EU involvement, he argues that the "outside push" was of utmost importance for the conclusion of the conflicts and the beginning of regional cooperation. In this part of the book we are presented with the history of regional cooperation in South East Europe through the development of regional initiatives and financial incentives like SECI, Stability Pact, Stabilization and Association Process, Partnership for Peace, CARDS, IPA, etc.

In the final section Bechev discusses the main theoretical approaches to identity studies (essentialist and social-constructivist), providing a connection with the studies of regionalism. Taking into account the constructivist approach, he contemplates the actors and discourses that have constructed the Balkan identity by guiding us through the relevant literature on the subject. Bechev then gives us an insight into the identity creation in the Balkans and the discourses of domestic (inside-out approach) and external actors (outside-in approach).

He concludes that outside actors, especially EU, NATO and the US had played a major role in the creation of contemporary regional identity through normative, transformative and socializing power or, in his own words: "To put it crudely, being a person from the Balkans means being a European who falls short of the normative expectations that make up 'Europeanness'" (p.80). Relating the identity perspective to that of political cooperation, Bechev proffers that the key turning point that lead towards the creation of good neighborly relations occurred when the authoritarian regimes in both Serbia and Croatia collapsed and when the governments of these countries proclaimed their 'return to Europe' (p.150). At that point, Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEECP) symbolized the "region's transformation from a volatile semi-European 'powder keg' to a community governed by 'European'standards and practices."

Dimitar Bechev's book provides a basic analysis of regional cooperation in the Southeast Europe, giving a wide perspective on grounds and motives for its development. Even

though this work, as the author himself emphasizes, can not be used to provide empirical support for the theories of regionalism because of the geographical magnitude of the region and the altering presence of certain countries, as regards regional issues it is still a valuable case study in IR analysis, showing the effects of the integration processes and the shifting of powers within the state politics, as well as the importance of identity creation. This book can not be described as one that offers a deep analysis on the subjects like regionalism, Balkans identity or the processes of Europeanization in the South East Europe. However, it presents a fairly good description of the history of regional cooperation and the basic theoretical approaches.

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