

STAGNATION AND DRIFT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

The Challenges of Political, Economic
and Social Change

Claire Gordon,
Marko Kmezic
Jasmina Opardija
(eds)



PETER LANG

Claire Gordon, Marko Kmezic and Jasmina Opardija

Introduction: The Challenges of Political, Social and Economic Change in the Western Balkans

This edited volume on *Stagnation and Drift in the Western Balkans: The Challenges of Political, Social and Economic Change* is the product of the Regional Research Promotion Programme (RRPP)¹ in the Western Balkans. It offers insights into the contemporary work of mostly younger social scientists from the Western Balkan region and beyond who are researching political, social and economic changes in the region. The chapters in this volume were initially presented and discussed at the third annual RRPP scientific conference in Budva, Montenegro, in May 2011. They were selected from among some 45 contributions in cooperation with the discussants from the eight thematic workshops that were held at the 2011 conference.

Annual conferences and the publication and dissemination of research are only two aspects of the work of the RRPP. The programme also supports a cooperation platform for social scientists working on the region with three interrelated pillars:

- support and financing of regional research projects conducted by researchers from Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia;
- provision of methods training to scholars in the region by well-established international scholars;
- the facilitation of regional and international cooperation and networking, in particular through the organization of international conferences.

1 This programme is run by the University of Fribourg and is fully supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

The RRPP for the Western Balkans was initiated in 2008 by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, motivated by the idea that social science research can contribute to higher quality evidence-based policy making and thus influence much-needed reforms in the political, social and economic domains in the region. Considering the difficult post-conflict context in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, and the EU-driven transitional processes that are still taking place throughout south-eastern Europe, the RRPP has emerged as one of the key actors enabling research that has direct relevance for these ongoing transformation processes in the region. For this reason the RRPP is particularly committed to supporting research in the following areas:

- the rule of law and democracy;
- economic development;
- social and economic change and the challenge of (new) social disparities;
- managing diversity (national, ethnic and religious identities, gender, youth, and minorities, including Roma);
- states, networks and informality.

It is hoped that the current volume will not only contribute to raising awareness of the particular political, social and economic challenges that the countries of the Western Balkans continue to face in the wake of the conflicts that ravaged the region in the 1990s and early 2000s and the resulting stalled postcommunist transition but that it will also highlight the range and diversity of the burgeoning researchers in the region and beyond. These researchers are working creatively in this area to expand knowledge and scholarship, to build academic communities and to develop departments and faculties in the social sciences in higher education institutions.

This introduction provides a brief overview of the current challenges that the region has been grappling with as a means of contextualizing the work of the young generation of scholars who have contributed to this volume. It briefly discusses the process of European integration as well as the problematic of external leveraging on the part of the EU, which has been beset by a combination of enlargement fatigue and internal preoccupations with the future

of the Eurozone in the midst of the current global economic crisis. We then turn to consider the constraints on democratic consolidation and state building before touching on the impact of the global economic crisis on the countries of the Western Balkans, underlining in particular the toll this has taken on youth across the region. The introduction concludes with an overview of the chapters that make up this edited volume.

The processes of democratic and socio-economic consolidation and the accession to the EU in south-eastern Europe have been fraught with difficulties. Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007 as laggards of the 2004 enlargement round to Central and Eastern Europe and Croatia will follow in 2013 but the rest of the region remains a long way behind with no prospect of accession for the foreseeable future. In addition to the dual political and economic transformations from authoritarian communist rule to pluralistic democracy and from a planned economy to market liberalism, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia remain weak states with dysfunctional institutions, notwithstanding the considerable diversity among these countries. Transformation in the former Yugoslavia was marked by state dissolution and violent conflict, necessitating reconstruction and reconciliation. The legacies of this period of violent conflict continue to shape political, social and economic conditions across the region.

Without disregarding continuing enlargement fatigue in EU institutions, which are currently preoccupied with the economic and financial crises and the very survivability of the Eurozone, it is exactly these multiple challenges that explain the current delay in the processes of transformation and EU integration in the Western Balkan countries (WBCs) and that have resulted in the replacement of the phase of accelerated transformation immediately after 2000 with a period of stagnation and drift. Although functionally separate, transition processes are intimately interwoven with the famous Copenhagen conditions, which were originally issued at the 1993 European Council for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe that were to form the 2004/2007 enlargement round. The year 2000, the so-called *annus mirabilis* for the WBCs, marked by the collapse of Slobodan Milošević's regime in Serbia and Montenegro, and the 'second' democratic revolution following general elections in Croatia,

provided new preconditions for the start of democratic consolidation and economic reform in the region. The same year, the EU launched its new policy initiative for the Western Balkans in the form of the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP). Although shaped in part by the Central and Eastern European enlargement model, in its design the SAP sought to take into account the peculiarities of post-conflict stabilization as well as the particular transformation and integration challenges facing the countries of the region. While offering an upfront 'perspective' of EU membership to the WBCs, at the same time the structuring of the SAP enabled the EU to introduce additional stages of conditionality into the process in view of the complex post-conflict conditions in the countries of the region while at the same time building on the perceived success of the instrument of conditionality in delivering transformative change in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Phinnemore, 2003; Gordon, 2009).

Despite the fact that the SAP was launched in 2000, the WBCs continue to be characterized as weak states with societies severely divided along ethnic lines. (Kostovicova and Bojicic-Dželilović, 2008; Ramet and Wagner, 2010). The momentum generated following the democratic changes in the region in 2000 has stalled and the current situation can at best be described as the consolidation of unconsolidated democracies (Bieber, 2012a). The latest edition of the *Nations in Transit* report presents a record of stagnation and backsliding in all key governance indicators across the countries of the region (Walker and Habdank-Kołaczowska, 2012). Liberal democratic governments seemingly identify themselves with the EU but a large number of formal and informal economic and political elites persist that continue to manipulate ethno-nationalist mobilization for their own private economic interests in the preservation of political power. Despite the initial steps that have been made, reconciliation after the violent conflicts from the 1990s is far from complete and conversely elite-level political decision making in some cases is still driven along the old ethno-national lines and these fault-lines are also reflected in widespread public attitudes. Thus in pre-election campaigns politicians are wont to resort to ethno-nationalist rhetoric abandoning trust-building and reconciliation discourses for ethno-nationalist discourses (Volcic and Dzihana, 2012; Bieber, 2012b).