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Review

Bieber, F. (2020). *Uspon autoritarizma na Zapadnom Balkanu.* Biblioteka XX vek. Florian Bieber. The rise of authoritarianism in the Western Balkans

Over a long period of time, tendencies towards authoritarianism have been visible in many corners of the world, not exclusively in Europe. While this phenomenon is not new, it may exhibit unique characteristics depending on the region in question. This is precisely what becomes the focus of Professor Florian Bieber's book *Uspon autoritarizma na Zapadnom Balkanu. Biblioteka XX vek*. In this monograph, Bieber discusses the problem in the context of the Western Balkan countries, offering a Serbian translation of the previously published English edition, *The rise of authoritarianism in the Western Balkans* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). The author assumes that the turbulent 1990s in the region paved the way for the rise of authoritarianism in this area. He aptly notes that while numerous texts have examined the wars in the Balkans in the last decade of the 20th century, there is a deficit in studies which would explain how the authoritarian elites ascended to power and retained it.

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The book is divided into an introduction, three chapters, and then conclusions with a prologue and an epilogue. The prologue addresses “the Balkan prince”, which is an exceptionally interesting and pertinent reference to Niccolò Machiavelli’s *The Prince*. The prologue offers this imagined Balkan ruler ten pieces of advice on maintaining power, each derived from a detailed analysis of the socio-political situation unfolding in individual countries of the Western Balkans over recent years. These pieces of advice not only explain how Balkan autocrats have remained in power but also serve as a blueprint for the in-depth discussions in the following chapters, highlighting the core attributes of the competitive authoritarian regimes operating in the Western Balkan states.

The introduction provides an analysis of the 1990s events that were important for the history of the Balkans. The author attempts to explain why the model of systemic transformation of the Central European countries failed to be implemented in the post-Yugoslav states as well as how to understand the competitive authoritarian regimes that emerged. The next chapter discusses the obstacles to democratic consolidation in the Western Balkan states. The author also clarifies the grounds for the emergence of semi-authoritarian regimes in the 1990s in the region and why it was not possible to build a consolidated democracy there. Moreover, he indicates the instrumental use of nationalism by those in power and stresses that the period between 1997 and 2000 marked a turning point in the history of the Western Balkans, adding that at that time, the region had already reached a consensus on a pro-European direction. In the next chapter, the author analyses the characteristics of the weakening of democracy in the Western Balkan countries. He reviews specific cases from the region in a manner that is both analytical and concise yet illustrative. The final chapter focuses on the instruments of authoritarianism such as governance through perpetual crisis, leveraging early elections to consolidate power, gaining external support/legitimization (e.g., from the EU), undermining the opposition, appropriating the state and weakening state institutions (which is exacerbated by the weakness of opposition forces and civil society) as well as mobilizing the media in favour of those in power. Bieber also points to the entry of new players like China and the United Arab Emirates in the Balkan political arena, where they compete with the well-established influences of the

EU, Russia, Turkey, and the United States. He astutely observes the strengthening grip of authoritarian leaders in recent years despite the simultaneous process of integration into the EU. The epilogue revisits the Balkan prince, echoing what was expressed in the prologue.

Clearly, the elements of authoritarian systems identified by the author do not manifest uniformly across different countries, which the author himself emphasizes by referring to Macedonia and the Colourful Revolution (*Šarena revolucija*) as a distinctive case where protests successfully facilitated change, debunking the notion that demonstrations are futile, especially since the Balkan autocrats are able to skillfully stage their own counter-protests and support rallies.

In the analysis of the patterns identified by the author, Montenegro stands out as a notable exception. After three decades, a shift in power finally transpired in 2020. Despite winning the elections, the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) was unable to forge a new government, resulting in the formation of a government without the involvement of that party, formerly dominant in Montenegrin politics. In a further turn of events in 2023, the previously uncontested leader Milo Djukanovic was defeated in the presidential elections, which marked the end of the reign of the long-standing “Balkan prince” through democratic means. Set against the backdrop of developments in other Balkan nations, the Montenegro scenario emerges as especially intriguing. Understanding why this political shift occurred necessitates a deeper and more nuanced exploration than might initially be apparent. Public protests and the influence of the famous liturgical processions of the Serbian Orthodox Church might have played a part in this transition, but they were not necessarily the sole factors. It is important to consider the public sentiment at the time, characterized by general fatigue, notably among the younger generation, with the persistent reign of the DPS and Djukanović. The policy that exacerbated divisions among citizens of different nationalities – primarily Montenegrin and Serbian, but also including Albanian, Bosnian, and Croatian groups – certainly had a role to play as well. Furthermore, a new player entered the political arena: the Europe Now Movement (*Pokret Evropa Sad!*, PES). This group chose to steer clear of these divisive issues, instead focusing their campaign on economic and social matters, a strategy that led many to view them as a credible alternative to the DPS. However, the victory of the Europe Now Movement

in the parliamentary elections, and that of its party member Jakov Milatović in the presidential race, does not necessarily indicate a substantial shift in governance. It remains to be seen what real changes will occur, and this assessment will take time. In addition, when examining the phenomenon of strong leaders – a recurring theme in Balkan history – the current Kosovo Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, serves as a noteworthy figure. The key question remains: should Kurti be regarded as a rare democratic leader in the region, or simply another in the line of Balkan princes?

Another interesting case in the analysis of the present situation in the Balkans is North Macedonia, which according to Prof. Bieber managed to distance itself from authoritarianism following the ousting of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski. After the Prespa agreement, which resolved a long-standing dispute with Greece, there was an expectation that Macedonia's European integration process would speed up significantly. However, the process became entangled once again due to firm demands from another neighbour, Bulgaria, and this fostered a sense of disillusionment with the EU, stirring nationalist sentiment among the Macedonian society. The possibility that VMRO-DPMNE, once led by the aforementioned Prime Minister Gruevski, may return to power in the forthcoming elections presents a dilemma: will it hinder the country's integration process again, or will it foster agreements with international partners and continue pro-European policies? Moreover, is there a risk of another unresolved bilateral conflict resulting in a return of a Macedonian "prince" or possibly even several "princes"? Having in mind the role of the Democratic Union for Integration, the largest Albanian party in Macedonia, it is possible that its leader, Ali Ahmeti, has already taken up, and continues to hold, the role of such a prince. Finally, there are the cases of Serbia and Albania, where President Aleksandar Vučić and Prime Minister Edi Rama respectively maintain extremely strong positions despite their lengthy tenures. Numerous protests in these countries have not facilitated a change in government; in fact, the existing authorities appear to have fortified their standings¹. The Montenegrin example

1 However, it should be acknowledged that with the outbreak of protests against violence in Serbia, the president's position was at its weakest since he took over the state.

illustrates that no reign is eternal; the “Balkan princes” will, sooner or later, see the end of their rule, possibly in a less dramatic fashion than one might anticipate from the long history of Balkan coups and revolutions. Yet what remains uncertain is the nature of their successors – will they be democrats eager to enhance the rule of law, or will they tread the path of autocracy?

Unfortunately, the emigration of young and educated people could hinder the process of removing the Balkan princes, necessitating further analysis. Professor Bieber’s book stands as essential reading, not just for researchers of the Balkans but also for scholars exploring nationalism, populism, and leadership. It serves as an excellent starting point for research in this field, extending beyond the Balkan region.