

Austin, R.C.: Making and Remaking the Balkans: Nations and States since 1878. Toronto–Buffalo–London, University of Toronto Press, 2019. 232 p.

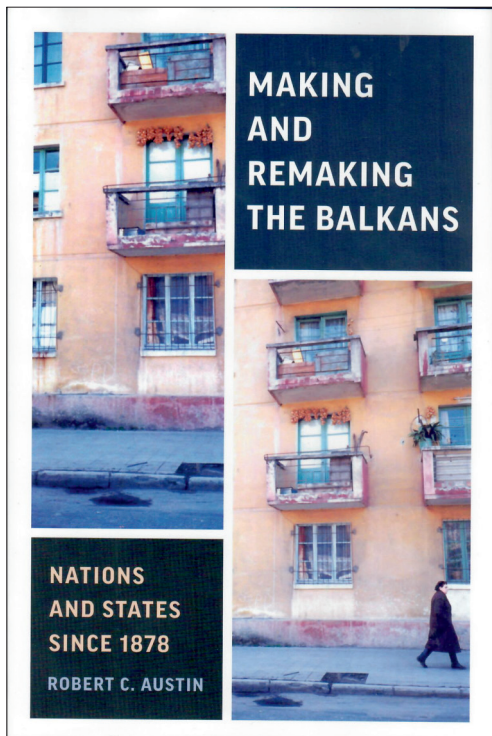
“Relatively unsuccessful in a number of ways” – as the author of this book describes the Balkans, and as the international public opinion and many people living there think about the region. Because of the war of the 1990s, the name of the Balkans has connected to the failure of democratisation and state-building. However, the negative perception of the Balkans is much older: the Balkan Wars following the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire established its bad reputation as early as the beginning of the 20th century. The much-mentioned Balkan powder keg, the scene of the Sarajevo Assassination, has no good reputation in the 21st century, either. Maria TODOROVA started her famous work about the Balkans with the following words: “A specter is haunting Western culture – the specter of the Balkans. All the powers have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this specter: politicians and journalists, conservative academics and radical intellectuals, moralists of all kind, gender, and fashion.” (TODOROVA, M. 2009. p. 3). Now we can read an attempt of exorcism, not

from a social scientist, but a fact-finding journalist and correspondent.

Robert C. AUSTIN traces the vicissitudes of creating and operating modern nation-states in the Balkans in a gripping and extremely readable work. Under the shadow of border changes and armed conflicts in recent decades, and of frequent government crises, the construction and operation of nation-state frameworks have been cumbersome even in the 21st century. As it appears in the subtitle of the book (*Nations and States since 1878*), AUSTIN follows the formation of nation-states in the region, trying to explore the causes of failure (*Making and Remaking the Balkans*) through political history. According to the author, the following states belong to the Balkans: “Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Greece, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia” (p. xiv). AUSTIN considers them the “products of the once-powerful Ottoman Empire” (p. xiv); therefore, he does not list Slovenia and Croatia among them (“their past placed them in the Habsburg Empire”; p. xiv). However, these two countries are also involved when discussing the events leading to the dissolution of Yugoslavia. In the “Introduction” to his book, the author briefly refers to the pejorative sense of the Balkans, but he only mentions the wars and failed transitions of the 1990s as the cause.

A few decades after the works of Edward SAID (1978) (*Orientalism*) and Maria TODOROVA (1997) (*Imagining the Balkans*), we still feel the power of discourses that regard one area and its peoples as ‘Other’. For AUSTIN, the mysterious area to be explored (the ‘Orient’) was the secular socialist state, the People’s Socialist Republic of Albania, in the 1980s. Thanks to this interest, he became more and more immersed in the study of the Balkans and the Central European countries of the former Eastern Bloc. He did his fact-finding work not as a social scientist, but as a journalist and correspondent, and as a result, he became an expert in the political history of the Central and South-eastern European states. Now we can read the results of his activity in this book. As an assistant professor at the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto, the author recommends his work to his students.

“This book is largely a political history that is not written for an academic audience.” (p. xix) – as we can read in the “Introduction”. AUSTIN gives a general interpretation of a region, where “there is too much history in too small place” (p. xiv), to everyone who is interested in political events of the world, especially travellers (not ordinary tourists) and undergraduate students.



In line with these goals, the light style makes his work especially readable (as we can expect from a journalist). AUSTIN invites the reader on an exciting Balkan journey through time and space. The focus of this trip is on territories and conflicts in which the Albanian population is affected. However, it is worth forgiving him for this unilateralism because the least known areas are the ones that are most discussed in this work.

The book consists of six chapters. After the “Acknowledgments” and the “Introduction”, where the author reveals the main goals and the structure of his work, political history starts with the 19th-century Ottoman Empire. Chapter 1 (*Making Nations and States*) summarises the history of more than a hundred years. A brief introduction of the discourse of nationalism in European nation-states, now considered classic, can be read here. According to this classic interpretation, under the influence of the French Revolution (1789), yet more than a century later, political events led to the break-up of multinational empires in the eastern part of Europe (starting in 1878 with the Ottoman Empire) and the establishment of a nation-state framework for Central and Eastern Europe. With these 19th-century nationalisms, a series of wars began in the history of the Balkans: the Russian-Ottoman wars, the Balkan Wars, the world wars, and, finally, the wars of the 1990s. Under the guise of these armed conflicts, dictatorships appeared in the region instead of the rule of law based on liberal ideas.

According to the author, in the 20th-century history of the Balkans, left-wing communists replaced right-wing fascist regimes, and after 1989 the opportunity for democratisation reopened. Behind the interpreted political history of states trapped in the shackles of nationalism and dictatorship, the author’s viewpoint also allows the games of the Great Powers on the Balkan chessboard to be seen. The big neighbours view the young nation-states of the Balkans as caring older brothers: as if the people here could not take care of themselves, so they needed outside help. The author also takes over this point of view to some extent, using it in his work. Therefore, he concludes by the end of the book that only joining the European Union can save the region.

After the story of a whole century, Chapter 2 (*Good News, Bad News: Before and After 1989*) briefly presents the political turnarounds of the few years after the transition. Due to his interest, the author explores the course of events from a particular territorial perspective. First, he explores the history of the change of regime in Albania, as well as areas neighbouring Albania

with Albanian populations, and travels to more distant countries (this is how he reaches Bulgaria and then Romania after the former Yugoslavia). According to his general finding, communist regimes handed over the power to authoritarian leaders in the Balkans who operate with nationalist vocals. His findings are supported by his experience in journalism (interviews, local friends, visits to Balkan countries), even with surprising judgments. For example, he writes about the mental abilities of newcomers (about Ramiz Alia, head of state of Albania from 1982 to 1992: “Prior to my interviews with him, my Albanian friends always warned me to be careful for he was clever and they thought he could spin me. He was not clever, not in the least.”; p. 41). He often uses clichés in describing situations (“... the Balkans really were Hotel California – you can check out but never leave.”; p. 54).

The following chapters no longer present the whole of the Balkans, but interpret decisive events with a territorial focus. The order is given by the intensity (and public awareness) of the events. Accordingly, the author devotes a separate (but short) chapter to the wars accompanying the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia (Chapter 3, *Hero-Free Wars and Ethnic Purity*). After a sketchy history of war events, AUSTIN discusses in one chapter the two ‘Albanian states’, Albania and Kosovo, as well as the armed conflicts associated with the independence of the latter (Chapter 4, *Albania Implodes, Kosovo Arms*). While the previous section offers other sources for more credible and detailed information (e.g., the BBC has also made a film and book adaptation of the war for a wider audience), in this chapter, he relies again on his personal experiences: “One friend noted the map on the flag was a bad omen. Among European states, only divided Cyprus had a map on his flag.” (p. 109).

Chapter 5 (*Contested Heroes: Alexander the Great, Mother Teresa, and the Republic of Macedonia*) introduces the circumstances of the creation of an independent Macedonian state and its hindrances. The international controversy surrounding the name of the new state and its national symbols, as well as its tense relationship with the Albanian minority, are a necessary step for the author to illustrate the political motives behind the monumental architectural program using classic symbols. This chapter reaffirms the author’s opinion in a previous chapter, which is considered controversial in a part of Europe characterised by the myths of national freedom and increasing ethnic nationalism: “As noted in Chapter 2, Macedonia and Bosnia have some

common features. Both republics would have been better served within a new and reformed Yugoslavia” (p. 113).

The last chapter of the book deals with the Balkan states that have recently joined the EU (Chapter 6, *To Europe, for Some: Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia*). The author sketches three different paths to the EU: a straight Slovenian, a Roman and Bulgarian with a curling ring, and a war-torn Croatian between the two. His book here is contradictory in some ways. Despite the list given in the introduction, it still deals with Slovenia and Croatia in detail, and these two countries also play a major role in the “Epilogue”. However, unfortunately, a chapter discussing Serbia and Montenegro in more detail is missing.

Each chapter ends with conclusions – general statements about the situation presented in the chapter. Finally, with a longer epilogue (*Epilogue: Grater This or Greater That, Alone or in Europe*), following the style of “Conclusions”, the book concludes with a general picture of the current political situation in the Balkan states. AUSTIN’s point of view is determined by the line of thought that emphasises the populist, nationalist and anti-liberal nature of the leadership of the Balkan (and Central and Eastern European) states. According to the reviewer, it is important to reveal the nature of these nationalisms. After the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, the new free European nation-states are similar to what Benedict ANDERSON calls “The Last Wave” (ANDERSON, B. 2006[1983]). If we would like to create a clear image about the Balkans, we should consider ANDERSON’S words: “One should therefore not be much surprised if revolutionary leaderships, consciously or unconsciously, come to play lord of the manor (p. 160). ... I emphasize leaderships, because it is leaderships, not people, who inherit old switchboards and palaces (p. 161). ... But nothing can be usefully done to limit or prevent such wars unless we abandon fictions like ‘Marxists as such are not nationalists,’ or ‘nationalism is the pathology of modern developmental history,’ and, instead, do our slow best to learn the real, and imagined, experience of the past.” (p. 161).

Robert C. AUSTIN wrote a book about the Balkans not for an academic audience, as we can read in “Introduction”. The associate professor at the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto worked as a journalist and correspondent and had been interested in Central and Southeastern European political events for decades. He has prepared an exciting and sweeping political handbook for interested readers in a highly readable style about an area

that is still mysterious and difficult for many to know. His Albanian-centric viewpoint is beneficial to the presentation of the area, as it places the least known and understood areas and conflicts at the forefront. The structure of the book reinforces the handbook character of his work. Chapters with territorial focus (Chapters 2–6) are framed by parts summarising history (Chapter 1) and current conditions (*Epilogue*). Each chapter concludes with a summary (*Conclusions*), and the index at the end of the book helps the reader search through the chapters. I recommend the book for anyone who wants to get a general overview of the political history of the Balkans.

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