Reiner Osbild and Will Bartlett (Eds.), *Western Balkan Economies in Transition: Recent Economic and Social Developments.* Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019 (Societies and Political Orders in Transition series). xii + 171 pp.

Reviewer: Aytuğ Zekeriya Bolcan

The Western Balkans occupy an unusual place in the European imagination. As Reiner Osbild and Will Bartlett observe in their introduction, the region tends to attract international attention chiefly in moments of crisis, such as the wars of Yugoslav succession in the 1990s, or the migration flows of 2015, while the patient, often frustrating work of economic and institutional convergence with the European Union goes largely unremarked. This edited volume sets out to correct that imbalance. Bringing together twelve contributions, several of which

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originated from a 2016 conference held at the University of Applied Sciences Emden-Leer, the book offers a measured, empirically grounded survey of the economic and social challenges confronting Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia as they pursue accession to the EU.

The volume is structured in two complementary movements. The opening chapters take a regional and thematic perspective, while the later chapters offer country-specific case studies. After the editors' framing introduction, which situates the six economies along a spectrum from the more liberalized-market economies of Albania and North Macedonia to the mixed economies of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia, with their large public sectors, the book proceeds with a sequence of cross-cutting analyses. Peter Sanfey and Jakov Milatović examine the Western Balkans Regional Economic Area, and the shift from economic cooperation toward deeper integration; Ivana Prica analyses trade in services; and Will Bartlett and Milica Uvalić address the interaction between higher education and graduate labor markets. Mehmed Ganić's chapter on labor markets, social inequality, and emigration rounds out the thematic section and foregrounds one of the volume's recurring concerns: the demographic and human-capital costs of sustained out-migration.

The second half of the book turns to individual economies. Engjëll Pere and Will Bartlett trace Albania's economic and social trajectory; Jelena Poljašević and Jelena Trivić assess public and private debt dynamics in Bosnia and Herzegovina; Petrit Gashi considers trade and industrial development in Kosovo; Maja Gerovska Mitev evaluates a decade of center-right social policy in Macedonia; Nikola Fabris analyses fiscal policy in Montenegro in the wake of the global financial crisis; and Bartlett returns with a chapter on economic reform and growth prospects in Serbia. A concluding chapter by Bartlett and Osbild draws the threads together, arguing that sustainable growth in the region depends on outward-looking policies and genuine regional integration rather than on inward-facing protectionism.

Several features make the volume a valuable contribution to the literature on transition economies and European integration. First, the editors resist the temptation to impose a single forecast or thesis on a heterogeneous region. The introduction is careful to underline that the six economies began their post-socialist trajectories from markedly different starting points, with Albania emerging from near-total isolation and the former Yugoslav republics from a relatively open variant of socialism that permitted travel, labor migration, and trade with both East and West. This attention to divergent initial conditions is sustained throughout and lends the country studies real analytical depth. The reader comes away with a clear sense of why convergence has been uneven and why aggregate regional figures can obscure as much as they reveal.

Second, the volume is empirically rich without being inaccessible. Contributors draw on data from the EBRD, UNCTAD, the World Bank, Eurostat, and national statistical offices, and they deploy it judiciously to illustrate concrete points, such as graduate skill gaps and vertical mismatches in the labor market, the composition of services trade, FDI stock per capita, debt indicators, and the fiscal consequences of crisis-era guarantees. The chapters on higher education and on labor markets are particularly strong in this respect, mobilizing survey evidence on employer needs and graduate outcomes that gives texture to the familiar narrative of a regional brain drain. Readers of the Journal of Balkan Economies and Management will find much that resonates with the journal's emphasis on methodologically careful, empirically robust research on the region.

Third, the book is consistently policy-aware. Because the contributors write with the EU accession process in view, the analysis is anchored in the institutional realities of the Stabilization and Association Agreements, the Berlin Process, and the European Commission's 2018 enlargement strategy with its much-discussed 2025 perspective. This gives the volume a practical orientation that distinguishes it from purely academic treatments. The editors are appropriately sober about prospects: they note that progress has been slower than hoped, that bureaucratic fragmentation, most strikingly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with its multiple layers of government, impedes reform, and that corruption and weak governance remain serious obstacles to convergence.

Among the individual contributions, a few deserve special mention. Fabris's chapter on Montenegro offers a clear-eyed account of how the global financial crisis exposed fiscal vulnerabilities and how state guarantees translated into mounting public debt, a cautionary tale relevant well beyond Montenegro's borders. Gashi's chapter on Kosovo is notable for situating contemporary trade and industrial patterns within the longer history of the territory's development under socialist Yugoslavia, reminding the reader that present-day structural weaknesses have deep roots. Gerovska Mitev's analysis of North Macedonian social policy is a welcome corrective to economistic accounts that neglect distributional questions, and it speaks directly to the volume's stated concern with social exclusion as a potential source of future political instability.

It is worth dwelling on the editors' framing argument, because it gives the collection its intellectual coherence. Osbild and Bartlett distinguish between the region's more liberal market economies and its mixed economies, and they observe that over the crisis period from 2008 to 2013, the more liberalized economies recorded markedly stronger average growth in GDP per capita than the mixed economies burdened with large, subsidized public sectors. This is a provocative observation, and one that invites debate: it raises the question of causality, whether liberalization drove growth, or whether other factors, including the differing severity of the crisis's impact and the structure of external financing, account for the divergence. The volume does not fully resolve this question, but it deserves credit for posing it clearly and for marshaling comparative evidence rather than asserting a doctrinal position. The persistent gap between regional living standards and the EU average, with even the best-performing economies hovering well below the EU-28 benchmark on a purchasing-power basis, frames the urgency of the analysis throughout.

Inevitably, a collective volume of this kind has limitations. The most obvious is one of timing rather than execution: published in 2019 and drawing substantially on data through 2015–2016, the book predates the COVID-19 pandemic, the energy-price shocks that followed, and the renewed geopolitical turbulence that has reshaped the EU's posture toward enlargement. The optimism surrounding the 2025 accession horizon, which frames several chapters, now reads as a historical artifact rather than a live prospect, and readers will need to supplement the volume with more recent material to assess how the trajectories described here have since unfolded. This is no fault of the authors, but it does bear on how the book should be used today, best as a careful baseline against which subsequent developments can be measured.

A second limitation is the uneven coverage that characterizes most edited collections. The country chapters do not follow a uniform template, so the depth of treatment varies: some economies receive sustained, multi-dimensional analysis, while others are examined through a narrower lens, such as debt in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, or fiscal policy in the case of Montenegro. A more standardized analytical framework, of the kind that comparative volumes sometimes impose, would have facilitated cross-country comparison, though it might have come at the cost of the specificity that is one of the book's strengths. Relatedly, the thematic and country-study halves are not always tightly integrated; a reader looking for a synthetic account of, say, labor-market dynamics across all six economies must assemble it from material scattered across several chapters. Finally, while the volume is attentive to the EU's role as an external anchor, it engages less fully with the region's other significant economic partners and with the political-economy dynamics that complicate the reform agenda. The introduction gestures toward organized crime, smuggling networks, and state capture as legacies of conflict and sanctions, but these themes recede in the more technical chapters. Given how central governance and informality are to the region's growth prospects, a more sustained treatment would have strengthened the book's diagnosis.

These reservations should not detract from the volume's overall achievement. Western Balkan Economies in Transition succeeds in its central aim of providing a comprehensive, accessible, and empirically serious account of a region too often reduced to headlines about crisis and conflict. The editors and contributors, many of them leading authorities on Southeast European economies, have produced a work that will serve students, researchers, and policymakers alike. For the scholarly community concerned with Balkan economies and management, it offers both a useful reference point and a model of how regional economic analysis can combine rigor with policy relevance. It is, in short, a worthy addition to the literature and a fitting candidate for the attention of this journal's readership.