

Prikazi knjiga/Book Reviews

Pål Kolstø (ed.)

Strategies of Symbolic Nation-building in South Eastern Europe
Ashgate, London, 2014, 300 pp.

More than twenty years after the dramatic changes that occurred in the Western Balkans region (understood as a group of post-Yugoslav states, without Slovenia, with the addition of Albania), the process of state-building is over for most of the cited countries. Nevertheless, the nation-building, i.e. the creation of national identities, is still a “work in progress”, even though certain symbols of national identity changed their role from being an aim in marking the boundary towards the Other to that of a mean for achieving nationalistic goals disguised under the face of patriotism and/or promotion of “traditional values”.

The book *Strategies of Symbolic Nation-Building in South Eastern Europe*, edited by Pål Kolstø (University of Oslo), analyzes how “state-initiated identity-building strategies in post-Communist states of the West Balkans” are received in the society (p. 3). The research team, gathered in the Norwegian Research Council’s project, combined a qualitative analysis with a quantitative study – a survey with around 1500 informants from each of the South Eastern European countries, in order to measure loyalty to the nation-building strategies imposed by political elites. Although most of the post-1989 research dealing with South Eastern Europe concentrated on “Yugoslav war/post-war studies and identity studies” (Kaser, 2014), such research was predominantly done focusing on political elites and institutions, leaving the agency of individuals and/or groups and their representation untouched. Therefore, this book is a pioneer contribution involving a large-scale sample on the regional level and providing important information and results for further research.

This book explores four main parameters determining symbolic nation-building: religious culture, ethnic culture, historical imagination and geographical imagination. The authors devoted great care to the methodological framework and the survey questions: the questionnaire consisted of 13 questions common to each of the seven case studies, but also of another set of questions aiming to capture country-specific issues. Qualitative analysis in this book focused on the most pertinent elements that forge national identity and thus clearly showed differences in the processes of nation-building. In addition, the authors tried to explain why certain nation-building projects can be deemed successful (Kosovo

and Albania had the highest loyalty level), while others failed (loyalty to Bosnia and Herzegovina happened to be way below the median, whereas the duality of identities in Montenegro put that country on sixth place on the loyalty index).

The chapter on Croatia, written by Vjeran Pavlaković, analyzed in depth the understanding of historical narratives laying at the core of nation-building process from the perspective of the Croatian struggle for independence. This research explored the nexus between “cultural memory” and “communicative memory” in relation to the narratives about the Second World War and the Homeland War. Finally, the author gave a valuable contribution on commemoration practices and geographical imaginary linked to the changes in public space (mostly street names and new/old monuments). Ana Dević’s work on Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) analyses the “expected” low loyalty level to the internationally imposed state framework of post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina. The author tried to understand both causes and consequences of the lack of civic representation at the expense of strong ethnic markers. Moreover, Dević rightly points out the importance of the local micro level space, determining belonging and common cultural references accepted by each ethnic category in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serbia has maintained a historical continuum with the former Yugoslavia and later federations, but seeks a historical period to be proud of in a more distant past, argues Vladan Jovanović. This chapter also deals with “constitutional symbolism” and strategies aiming to “poeticize social reality” (p. 93). Jelena Džankić’s work on Montenegro explained the dynamics of rival nation-building processes, i.e. competing political strategies related to Montenegrin and Serbian identity construction. The chapter on Macedonia also underlined the notion of duality and explored how a nation-building strategy aiming to allow symbols related to each ethnic group managed to reconcile the Macedonian and Albanian communities. Vjollca Krasniqi’s chapter on Kosovo examined strategies of making this country an “imagined community” and exposed a trend of relating to Kosovo’s history of the 1990s, “modernization and Europeanization” (p. 162). Finally, Albania, which had second best loyalty score, is an interesting case especially because of the scarce importance of religious elements of national identity.

The concluding chapter discusses the results and tests preliminary hypotheses. Rather strangely, the editor did not mention these hypotheses at the beginning of the book. The authors presumed that the successful nation-building process, measured as loyalty in this study, would depend on successful state-building projects, levels of democracy and demographic homogeneity. It turned out that correspondence of the state-building project, measured with factors such as GDP per capita, unemployment rate, Human Development index and life expectancy, and nation-building process could not be framed in any positive theory. Moreover, the level of democracy also did not show the expected results, but the demographic homogeneity did. Finally, religion behaves as a variable depending on ethnicity. Nevertheless, no *a posteriori* model explaining the strategies of nation-building was proposed at the end. However, the quality of the research done and the well-designed methodology will certainly place this book high on reading lists, not only for scholars and students interested in studies of South Eastern Europe, but to also among a wider audience focusing on nation-building processes.

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