

Comparative Instability

in the Balkans and the Middle East

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Abstract

This article comparatively examines the instabilities in the world's two most complicated regions with reference to the decline of the systemic factors, absolute determinism on social, political, and economic developments. The author argues that actors in the Balkans and the Middle East will continue to defy U.S. and West European preferences and lectures as they work out the relationship between their parochial interests, ideological preferences, and economic exigencies. To this end, as the author holds, in both regions domestic grassroots level social and political factors will be the main driving factor of both political status quo and political change. In this way, the article concludes that since no single state or group of powers stands astride international relations, in this new era, regional patterns of trade, aid, alliance, and enmity will become difficult to read.

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There is no such thing as “the” International Community. Rather, the United States and—to the extent their diminished status permits—West European powers use their international leadership capacity to avoid accommodating shifting global tectonics. Teleological rhetoric about democracy and the rule of law obscures traditional Western reliance on inertia and force; the former in particular leads the powers to distrust and misunderstand social and political change worldwide.

This essay compares and contrasts events in two regions where the gradual decline of Western hegemony is playing out. Over the past two decades, changing security contexts, regional revolutions in thought and action, and local rivalries in both areas have precipitated unrest and social realignment. Actors in the Balkans and the Middle East will continue to defy US and West European preferences and lectures as they work out the relationship between their parochial interests, ideological preferences, and economic exigencies. For the moment, conditions in southeastern Europe are less lethal in North Africa and Western Asia; however not even the desire of the Balkan states to join the European Union will preserve what remains an fragile status quo in southeast Europe.

The Regions and the “West”

Balkan and Middle Eastern peoples have experienced serial Western interventions since Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798, which is a natural point to start an analysis of regional security for both regions. In both areas, the ease with which France was able to seize a place central to Ottoman power and prestige led to premature expectations that the Ottomans would soon be finished. The precocious (in terms of being an early precursor to current explosions in Islamist activism) Wahhabi uprising predated Western predations and sent another signal regarding the weakening of Ottoman power. Uprisings in Greece and Serbia set in motion the struggle for national expression that continues to this day. One important commonality is that—more often than not—Middle Eastern and Balkan sectarian, ethnic, and family identities have overwhelmed Western efforts to force local populations to accept various Western versions of civic modernity.

Napoleon soon had to evacuate his nascent empire in Egypt, the Levant, and Syria and notional Ottoman suzerainty persisted in the Middle East and much of the Balkans. Nevertheless, from 1798 until very recently, the “West” (as we know it, this term came into general use at about this time) imposed on and attempted to institutionalize in both regions security caps, financial and legal arrangements, and

other trappings of modernity. Each of these very different adventures crested and receded—the current teleology of representative democracy and “rule of law” is the last of these and likely will prove no more durable.

The variance in Western approaches has corresponded to considerable differences in the various Powers that have stumbled their way into the Balkans and the Middle East. Since 1798 there have been seven incarnations of the West, each with its distinctive coercive utopia.

- The first, Byronic and philhellenic, helped shape a three-way tug of war among Greeks in the Balkans (Phanariot Ottoman administrators and soldiers, people attached to the externally imposed dynasty or loyal to the small post-1830 state centered on Athens, and those dreaming of a neo-Byzantine restoration of a Greek Empire with Constantinople as its capital). More important—but not part of the story here—this “West” and its idealized nod to classical philosophy influenced the development of German philosophy, archaeology, and other aspects of elite thought and bourgeois *bildung* that would inform both Western thought and the German drive for power in the 20th Century.
- The second West involved

the Bismarckian merger of crowns and nationalisms that placed German princes on various thrones in Central and Eastern Europe. This phenomenon undercut the so-called Millet system, influenced such phenomena as “Young Ottomanism,” and brought European administrators and their financial reforms to the Middle East. During the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century, Egypt’s Albanian dynasty (Mehmet Ali’s Balkan origins provided an idiosyncratic tie between the two regions, as did Mustafa Kemal’s origins in Thrace and experiences in Libya) morphed from one bent on replacing the Ottomans in Constantinople to a more Western-style monarchy focused on Egypt. Franco-Russian rivalry over which of them should “protect” Christians in the Ottoman Empire helped set in motion the formation of what would become Lebanon. Britain, meanwhile, came to control the French-built Suez Canal. This West, marked in many places by a sprinkling of German princes, had a major impact on nationalist movements in Greece, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, and eventually Albania.

- The third West emerged when

the second largely self-destructed in World War I. Woodrow Wilson brought the novelty of American Democratic ideology to a Europe disgusted by four years of slaughter and the incompetence of its leaders. However, this was an America without staying power, and neither Wilson nor anyone else prevented Britain and France, though wounded, from privileging their security concerns over other considerations regarding how to organize Eastern Europe and the Middle East. At that time, Serbia—which had per capita losses greater than any other combatant—was viewed as a heroic member of the victorious coalition. The victors awarded it domination of a new Yugoslavia, which set in motion developments that are still affecting southeastern Europe. Meanwhile, the imperial shadow of the second Europe created political conditions in North Africa and Western Asia the Middle East that only now are unraveling.

- Fascism and Communism, the fourth and fifth Wests, had rather extreme coercive utopias. The former attracted allies in Croatia and Bosnia, occupied Europe from the Atlantic almost to Moscow, influenced an “Aryan” Reza Shah

to turn Persia into Iran, and had some resonance among Arab elites concerned with growing Jewish immigration into Palestine. Its defeat by the Red Army brought Communism to a dominant position in Eastern Europe to such an extent that the “Balkans” virtually disappeared as a subject of security discussion, even in post-1948 Yugoslavia. Arab Socialism and Nasser also borrowed from this Communist West. Events since the collapse of Communism have suggested the Marxist Left has little influence on events in the absence of Soviet power.

- The United States 2.0—America with pretensions of being globally indispensable, buttressed by enormous military muscle—and the European Union are the current, and final links in this two century-old chain of empire and hegemony. The eclipse of a prostrate Europe by the US and Soviet Union made Europeans feel small as well as disoriented, spurring the ideology of a European West that fancies itself as having voluntarily replaced power and colonies with wisdom and humanity. This sublimation of the pain of global diminution into a coercive utopia of pedantry and international courts has

led this European West to test itself repeatedly and unsuccessfully in the Middle East. It also has motivated Europeans to attempt to manage the Balkans—initially saying it did not need US help—in the 1990s. Neither the pattern of failure these efforts produced nor emerging evidence of economic limitations has prevented the Europeans from continuing to seek to recover their sense of self-importance by telling peoples in both regions how to behave.

Is the Lightness of Being Unbearable, or Just a Challenge?

Waves of instability in the Balkans and Middle East periodically have led to disorientation and unrest in both former Ottoman peripheries. In both regions, family and patronage-based social and economic networks traditionally—and still—attract more trust than governments or such exogenous coercive utopias as “democracy”.

Still, the experiences of being intervention zones are similar only in part. The period of explosive conquest by Islamicized Arabs after the Prophet’s death and the spiritual high relief Arabic continues to hold as a sacred language enables a sense of identity and historical privilege in the Muslim universe unlike anything available to Balkan historians, publicists, and political elites.

Rather, the various Balkan nations, all of which were formed (as their languages were reconstructed) in the past two centuries, built their collective memories on competitive stories of victimization. Each identified its own villainous relevant others, and—unfortunately—continues too often to view neighbors as enemies. This has enabled a cultural and political fragmentation of southeastern Europe which has frustrated serial efforts by the Wests to impose various security caps (with the exception of the relatively stable Communist interlude between 1945 and 1990).

In contrast to the social glue Arabic provides in the Arab Middle East, the collapse of Yugoslavia led to the conscious dismantling of the “Serbo-Croatian” language constructed by 19th century philologists who hoped to create a larger south Slavic identity. Since 1991, the speakers of “Serbian”, “Croatian”, and “Bosnian” have gone to great efforts to use word choice and grammar to increase the linguistic space between their communities. Albanian and Slavic students learn English, German, and Chinese, but for the most part have stopped learning each other’s languages.

Therefore, nothing exists in the Balkans to match the roles of Islam and “Arab” as potential unifiers or ideological umbrellas over more granular loyalties of family, state, or sect. The specter of a Muslim or an Arab community, no matter how contested or

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problematic, offers a cultural common ground unknown in the Balkans. The heritage of an Orthodox Christianity subordinate to Byzantine and Ottoman authorities, and divided administratively by emerging national divisions, does not enable anything like some Muslims' constructed memory of a universal Islamic Caliphate.

This affects local minorities as well as titular *Staatsvolker*. In the Middle East, except for the Kurds (who one day could join Iran and Israel in forming a non-Arab state), the most non-Arabs and non-Muslims can hope for is a tenuous set of minority rights. That is a central meaning of Egypt-

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tian President Morsi's successful, if contested, management of the constitutional drafting and referendum process that has laid the groundwork for

a resoundingly Islamic Egypt. Balkan peoples, lacking a common religious or communal context, compete over sovereignty, borders, and political legitimacy under the well-known slogan, "Why should I be a minority in your country, when you can be one in mine?"

The Otpor Problem

The place of civic mythology in each region also is different. No matter the rhetoric of student activists and leftist academics, the return of Islam to the center of political social and even economic discourse is the central meaning of the upheavals of 2011 in the Arab world. Indeed, since the Iranian revolution of 1978-9, Islam—however contested—has proven more salient than liberal or left-wing demands for various versions of Democracy, social equality, and rule of law. Western observers have forgotten their own history; those whose voices dominated in the early stages of revolutions in 1789, 1848, and 1917 soon were eclipsed either by more disciplined and better mobilized forces, or by an effective response from the forces of reaction. In the Arab world—no matter claims by secular professors and intellectuals that Islamist governments' economic management problems will help liberals and leftists reclaim a place in the political agora—decisive competitions for power and personal pride of place are more likely to take place within the Islamist universe, not between those who are religious and those who are not.

In part, the shortsighted vision of secular activists in the Middle East may have been inherited from their counterparts in the Balkans. The prevailing view among academics and others who embrace the norm of anti-ethnic cosmopolitanism is that Slobodan Milosevic and other autocratic personalities brought down the Yugoslav order in after 1990 in order to demobilize populations ready to forge a civic future. This is a feel-good story in which civic Yugoslavs organized a movement similar to those that brought down Communism elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989. The message is that activism by academic and civic cosmopolitan entrepreneurs not only is virtuous, but provides a practical basis for a politics that when properly mobilized and resourced will overcome those seeking to impose regimes based on ethnicity or religion.

Further, this sort of civic politics has been touted by public academics and other intellectuals as especially conducive to Bosnia and other Balkan places that allegedly have a history of anti-ethnic social interaction. They cite the multiculturalism of Sarajevo and social mixing of cultures throughout the region as precisely the motivation that led Milosevic, Croatian strongman Franjo Tudjman, and the others to overthrow a budding civic revolution. Therefore, Yugoslavia, which under Tito's idiosyncratic Communism had nurtured its identity as independent and non-aligned,

was—and its shards remain—ripe for civic futures.

This narrative relies on anachronism, misidentifying the synchronic conditions of pre-modern politics for a diachronic commitment to pluralistic communities. For centuries, the Balkans had been dominated by various imperial outsiders; the standard politics of Empire played down 19th century-like national rivalries in favor of loyalties to dynasties or to local notables more concerned with their particular interests—and place in the imperial pecking order—then with what “nation” they belonged to. Imperial administration was typically blurry, permitting multiple lines of authority and resource distribution networks (sometimes parallel, sometimes intersecting) that enabled peoples with different languages, religions, and other markers of identity to live side by side without viewing their neighbors as daily rivals for security and material welfare. In short, contemporary observers who point to civic traditions in Bosnia (to include locals as well as outside academics) and elsewhere mistake pre-national context for non-ethnic commitment.

Tito ran Yugoslavia with this history in mind. His was an opaque administration that enabled multiple lines of authority and patronage (with his personal role as capstone, of course). He explicitly struggled to minimize the ethnic divisions he knew could threaten regional stability. Tito's sys-

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tem survived for a decade after his death, partly because everyone knew the danger nineteenth century-style nationalism presented to the opaque patronage networks on which stability depended. These critical structures, misunderstood as “informal” and regarded as “corrupt”, have remained central to a post-Yugoslav condition in which Western theories of “governance,” rule of law, transparency, and development have proven unworkable.

As Milosevic pushed Yugoslavia toward its death throes, those who touted the myth of civic politics looked towards a Western-style future. Some attempted to spur Yugoslav Prime Minister Ante Markovic to organize a movement to bring this about. Markovic, however, was slow off the mark. He created a political party months after the collapse of the old League of Communists, well after better-organized nationalist alternatives had won elections in Slovenia and Croatia. Public opinion polls proved Markovic was popular; unfortunately, the low vote totals he garnered once he did enter electoral contests demonstrated how poorly his movement was organized. It was Milosevic, nationalists of all stripes, and traditional patron-

age networks in Bosnia and elsewhere who were mobilized, not Markovic and the civic activists.

This pattern has largely persisted since then. Milosevic himself was overthrown after a string of elections starting in 1991 in which he proved himself vulnerable if an opposition could get its act together. His adversaries finally did so in October 2000, in an event that has since been misunderstood as an unalloyed triumph of democratic and civic politics.

Otpor, a movement of students and intellectuals, famously participated in the overthrow of Milosevic. This organization descended from groups of students and intellectuals who had attempted unsuccessfully to bring him down in 1991 and 1996. There is no question that civic organizers learned many lessons from those failures and by 2000 were ready to take advantage of the dictator’s overconfident decision to run for re-election.

Otpor, however, did not bring down Milosevic by itself. For the first two days after the 2000 elections—as in 1991 and 1996—Milosevic’s opponents appeared unsure what to do next aside from staging the usual demonstrations. The difference this time was that, for their own reasons, coal miners and residents of smaller towns in the heartland of Serbia joined the revolution. The climactic seizure of the Parliament building on October 5 largely was accomplished by the residents of the town of Cacak and Velimir

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Ilic, their populist mayor, not the usual blend of students and Belgrade intellectuals. (In part, what had alienated those from Cacak and other towns in the Serb heartland was the perception that Milosevic had put their sons in harm's way in disproportionate numbers during the 1999 NATO bombing campaign over Kosovo). Since 2000, Serbian politics have followed the patterns of other areas in the former Yugoslav space; traditional patronage politics and informal financial deal-making dominate, not the coercive civic utopias propagated from the West via Otpor. Constitutions get drafted and elections get held, but those who come to power spend more time arguing over which individuals or coalition parties will control public companies and other patronage piggy banks than they do about the substantive issues Westerners keep pressing on them.

Nevertheless, some Otpor figures have tended to overstate the credit they deserved for bringing down Milosevic and creating democracy in Serbia. Otpor put up candidates in Serbia's

first free elections. When these people were defeated soundly by other more traditional types of politician, some activists lamented that the country wanted them to save Serbia from the dictator, but not to rule in his stead.

After this defeat, Otpor went on the road. Serbian activists taught the lessons of agitation and organization to audiences in Africa and elsewhere, and by 2011 had made their way to Tunisia, Egypt, and other places in the restive Middle East. The Otpor activists doubtless passed on many useful tactical lessons to educated, cosmopolitan counterparts in Tunis and Cairo, who likely put to use what they learned in the revolutions that brought down Ben Ali and Mubarak.

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actor in 2000, they made a mistake. Such a misapprehension could partly explain why—like Otpor's reconstructed memory of 2000—Middle Eastern students, intellectuals, and other educated urbanites continue to overestimate their role as the inheritors as well as progenitors of recent revolutionary events.

They may be discovering what intellectuals learned in Yugoslavia after 1990. It is possible that educated, multi-lingual elites can be out-organized and out-thought by the poorer and rural people they often look down upon. In the contemporary Balkans and Middle East, it is the educated classes that have been pushed to the sidelines. Moreover, despite repeated denials of the fact, it is those motivated by religion or ethnicity who have more often than not demonstrated an ability to dominate post-authoritarian politics.

In addition, it is Hezbollah, Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood and similar Islamic groups—not civic activists or even governments—that perform essential social services similar to those provided by patronage networks in the Balkans. In both areas, these non-civic actors enable people to depend on them for the subsistence and security the intellectuals are unable or unwilling to ensure. In this context, successful political parties in both regions are simply the official tips of patronage icebergs. To a large extent, states function more as stakes in opaque resource rivalries than as active political and social entities.

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Kosova, and—more recently—Macedonia know they can win elections with only marginal need for electoral manipulation. The same is true for Muslim Brotherhoods and other Islamists in the Middle East. They also tend, more often than not, to dominate post-election political bargaining. Bosnia's Social-Democrats are an exception that prove the rule—Zlatko Lagumdžija, their leader, has proven to be as patronage-oriented as the ethnic-based parties—Bosnjak, Serb, and Croat—with which he has struck deals.

The political bosses worry more when they lose to a rival patronage network, because then they likely will lose control over the proceeds of public companies. They might even face arrest for the “corrupt” behavior they and their successors share—the new winners might well want to put their competitors in jail to minimize the chance of their comeback. It remains to be seen how Middle Eastern Islamist parties will react as they compete with each other for power and resources.

Looking Forward in the Balkans

The dominance of religious and ethnic divisions and centrality of patronage politics will continue to determine the distribution of power and resources in both regions. The Americans and Europeans will continue to deliver lectures, of course, but the two declining West will increasingly find themselves unable to drive local developments. This is true despite continuing interest among Balkan states in joining the EU. The Union's willingness to grant Romania and Bulgaria precipitate membership and its blessing of Montenegro's candidacy prove that the locals can pursue patronage politics, opaque financial transactions and still get into a club that—for now—many still hope will magically enable them to prosper.

Unlike the Middle East, in the Balkans serious violence appears unlikely in the short run. Macedonia may be in the most immediate danger; one of the only former Yugoslav entities not formed through battlefield decisions or major internal violence is drifting toward what could become a dangerous inter-communal conflict. The country so far has held together by the 2001 Ohrid agreement signed between Macedonian and ethnic Albanian notables after a short round of inter-community fighting. The Albanians, about a quarter of the country's population, believe the government has not fulfilled promises at made at Ohrid to provide them jobs and permit them greater use of Albanian symbols

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and language. For their part, Macedonian authorities argue they have been forthcoming with the Albanians, and want to focus instead on grandiose architectural and political projects designed to assert the identity of a community denied—in different ways—by its Greek, Bulgarian, and Serbian neighbors.

Serbia's rejection of the contested sovereignty of Kosova—from 1913 until 1999 a Serbian province—gets more international attention than problems in Macedonia, but for now is less likely to provoke violent conflict. The new Serbian government recognizes it cannot overcome international opposition to the re-imposition of its authority in Serbia's former province.

Belgrade can be patient. The slow-motion US failure to achieve universal recognition of its Kosovar client means the Serbs will have future opportunities to chip away at Kosova's sovereignty. In 2006, Washington

expressed confidence there would be a new UN Security Council Resolution sanctifying Kosova—and insisted Russia would not block it. After Moscow did just that, the Americans spent the next year or so preparing the diplomatic ground on which Pristina would declare its independence and achieve recognition piecemeal. Since that declaration (in February 2008), more than 90 countries have recognized the new state. Nevertheless, five EU members have not, which means that—while Serbia has a notional, if deeply rutted path toward EU membership—Kosova’s candidacy faces fundamental obstacles.

The impossible state of Bosnia-Herzegovina poses perhaps the most serious longer-term danger of serious instability. Arbitrary, improvised US and European policies pursued as their demands and declarations failed to halt or manage the 1992-1995 war culminated in a Bosnia saddled with a virtually non-existent central government and divided into two formal entities—a coherent Serb republic and a forced Federation between mutually hostile Bosnjak and Croat communities. To complicate matters further, this is the first stand-alone “Bosnia” (that is, unattached to a larger imperial or Yugoslav polity and market) since the 15th Century. It is not clear where this rump country will find legal comparative advantages or political viability.

In the 1990s, American diplomats advertised the Ottoman-era term “Bosnjak” as the marker for all citizens of the cobbled state. Not surprisingly, Serbs and Croats rejected this, leaving the word to represent only the country’s Muslim plurality. Some Bosnjaks, unhappy with a dysfunctional Bosnia that was forced on them at Dayton in 1995, increasingly are reforming themselves as a transnational ethnic and religious identity. Although Serb and other publicists exaggerate the presence of “Wahhabi” Muslims in Bosnia, an influx of Saudi and Iranian money since Yugoslavia’s collapse and the revival of Islamist discourses worldwide is feeding interest in greater religiosity.

What may be an even stronger tendency is the adoption of the “Bosnjak” label by Muslim Slavs in the Sanjak (an area once all in Serbia but divided since 2006 with the independence of Montenegro) and in Kosova. A newly minted “World Bosnjak Congress,” headed by Mustafa Cerić, former Islamic Community Reis-ul-Ulema, aims to help mobilize a religious and communal identity not confined to the borders of Bosnia.

In doing so, Bosnjaks are taking a page from a Turkish example for which they express explicit respect. The Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) skillful melding of religion, politics, and economic competence is increasing the appeal of a Turkey whose performance contrasts sharply

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with the unsuccessful regional management strategies emanating from Washington and European capitals. Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu’s visits to the region and his occasional appeals to a shared Ottoman experience resonates with Bosnjaks dissatisfied with the impact on their interests of post Yugoslav fragmentation in the Balkans.

Looking Forward in the Middle East

The Turkish example also informs developments in the Middle East, but—as in the Balkans—in terms of lessons learned rather than as a rigid model. Given the important Syrian exception, Ankara’s skill in nurturing its image while not repeating the Western mistake of asserting authority and secular teleology has maximized Turkish influence. For the most part, the Turks have been sensitive to the fact that the Ottoman experience is not remembered fondly in the Arab world.

Patience is the AKP’s central lesson for Islamist politics in the Middle East. The region’s Muslim Brotherhoods have learned this lesson on their own, of course, but the skill with which the AKP leadership has moved Turkey from a secular Kemalist ethos toward the revival of religion in society is pro-

viding an example of how to do this.

In Tunisia, “patience” means altering the constitution to guarantee the rights of those citizens with a secular orientation, while in Egypt a more confident Islamist government so far has overawed its educated, pluralist opponents without making the same concessions. Whether economic problems lead to a significant increase in votes for secular parties in future elections will be an important indicator of whether in Tunisia or Egypt there will exist a robust secular alternative to the various flavors of Islamist politics. Libya, administered in its current form only since 1951, still is in a stage where it is not clear whether it will have a meaningful central government or—somewhat in the Bosnian mode—will be dominated by regional, tribal, and other patronage systems.

The figures of Iraq, Syria (and its Lebanese extension), and Jordan are linked, even though instability in the first was enabled by the US invasion of 2003, cataclysm in the second took place only during the general unrest in the Arab world of 2011, and unrest in Jordan is yet to occur. These states were created in their current form by the post-World War I settlement, and are as vulnerable in the wake of that arrangement’s unraveling as the pieces of Yugoslavia when the Cold War came to an end. Stability in all three was undermined when the US—by invading Iraq—destroyed a boundary that had functioned (sometimes

de facto, sometimes *de jure*) to separate Arab and Persian influence since Ottoman-Safavid arrangements in the 17th century. From Beirut to Baghdad, Aleppo to the Red Sea, borders, power, resource distribution networks, and the interests of tribes, religious communities, and other social forms are all now up for grabs. In Syria, like Bosnia in the 1990s, population movements along ethnic or sectarian lines—voluntary and otherwise—could well preclude the emergence of a strong central secular, civic government in the post-Assad era.

In all these cases (with the exception of Jordan, assuming the monarchy holds together), local patronage systems based on ascriptive and affiliative networks will likely be more important than the notional states set up by or recognized by international authorities.

The Middle East may come to resemble the contemporary Balkans to the extent that informal social and economic activity provides resources more reliably than notional governments or the gradually declining Wests. We are entering an era in which no single state or group of powers stands astride international relations. Therefore, regional patterns of trade, aid, alliance, and enmity will become difficult to read, especially by those in the old power centers who are looking only for evidence that they remain more important than everyone else.