

Nationalism, identity and statehood in post-yugoslav montenegro

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BOOK REVIEW

Nationalism, identity and statehood in post-yugoslav montenegro, by Kenneth Morrison, London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi, Sydney, Bloomsbury, 2018, 267 pp., £91.80 (hbk), ISBN 978-1-4742-3518-1

It is both a strength and a weakness of this excellent book that it pays incredible attention to detail. Kenneth Morrison, one of the very few experts on Montenegro, outside of the region, has produced a tome worthy of any bookshelf dedicated to the Balkans. In fact, he goes further, Morrison brings to life a country which many people don't know exists and makes clear why presuming the 'Balkans' is just one place is wrong. To do so he gives the reader a thorough grounding in the history and politics of this country going back more than 100 years. For the non-specialist this takes perseverance – but it's worth the effort involved to gain a full understanding of why Montenegro remains at the centre of east-west relations and how it is relevant to wider issues such as the Ukraine conflict and even Brexit – amongst other things.

The book starts by setting the scene since the turn of the twentieth century. It highlights the 'hasty' departure of King Petrovic in 1915 amidst the chaos of the First World War and proceeds to chart why this happened and what happened thereafter. Montenegro, with a strong nationalist identity, navigated the time between the wars and then Nazi occupation before being entangled in the Cold War machinations of Stalin and Tito's 'Yugoslavia'. During the socialist era '... the question of Montenegrin identity' was 'present though it was muted and far from mainstream' (27) but it re-emerged, revitalised, following Tito's death, in the 1980s.

Morrison then turns his attention to how Montenegro criss-crossed the minefields – literal and political – of the Balkan Wars in the 1990s maintaining a measured distance from Belgrade without antagonising the ego, and threatening the power, of Slobodan Milosevic whilst Montenegro was still affiliated to it. Chapters two, three and four cover this ground taking into account the Albanian, Muslim, minority in Montenegro and the role of the Orthodox Church in dealing with Belgrade. These chapters explain how a country riven with religious and ethnic cleavages came to terms with the need to give them all a voice within a nascent democracy after years of authoritarianism – and with the portentous presence of Milosevic always there.

Chapters five and six explore the political development of Montenegro after the Balkan wars and the continuing relationship with the dominant partner, Serbia, within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Chapter seven meanwhile considers the dilemmas faced, as a potential NATO target, in the run up to the Kosovar conflict in 1999. After Milosevic's removal, in 2000, Podgorica then had to establish autonomy and security within febrile politics which culminated in the independence referendum in May 2006 – passed by 55%-45%.

"... the outcome of the referendum determined that there were political casualties, blood on the carpet, winners and losers, and joy for the victors and despair for the defeated. Consequently, the country entered into this new era with a divided body politic and a sense of embitterment among a significant minority ... some of whom did not recognise the legitimacy of the result". (133)

Morrison outlines how Montenegro has dealt with this challenge since the early 2000s by aligning itself with the major liberal institutions whilst trying to establish its own liberal traditions. The last chapter brings readers up to 2016 and the arrival of another portentous presence, Vladimir Putin. It includes the events of October 2016 and the alleged state coup on the same day as parliamentary elections which was aimed at preventing the deepening of Montenegro's ties to the western security architecture. It seems likely that its prospective membership of NATO was considered sub-optimal by Moscow.

In conclusion then, readers of this book will emerge with a dense understanding of Montenegrin politics and how it fits into wider contemporary international relations. It is a much-needed addition to the literature and adds depth to the usual two-dimensional view of the 'Balkans'. Its nuanced approach undermines any idea of an identikit region – and highlights the micropolitics of an area still dealing with the legacy of its volatile history. It will be invaluable to students of the region and to those interested in the post-Soviet space. Whilst not an easy read to anyone not already thoroughly acquainted with the subject matter – it would certainly be a challenge to non-specialists – it is worth the effort to understand this small country with huge significance although anyone interested in contemporary politics – and in a hurry – may want to skip to the later chapters.

For overall if readers want to understand why peacekeeping forces are still stationed in the Balkans and why they are needed as well as the rich culture and interconnectedness of politics and religion, the perseverance pays off. Morrison rightly concludes that Montenegro " . . . risks becoming the centre of a tug of war between Russia and the 'West' (173) and its future stability is, to some extent, dependent on the future of the EU itself beset as it is by existential angst. Hence, whilst the level of detail of the book may be a challenge to the casual reader it is a boon to the specialist and is necessary to understand the complexity of what is happening now in the wider European and Eurasian sphere – and how we arrived at this precarious juncture.

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