Simić, Olivera, and Zala Volčič, eds.  

Within the large field of transitional justice, the relationship between domestic civil society and the process of dealing with the past remains an understudied topic, especially in postcommunist Eastern Europe. While scholarship on transitional justice in Latin America has emphasized the mobilization of human rights networks as a crucial factor that determines accountability measures after dictatorships, this issue has been rarely explored within the context of postcommunist transformations. Simić and Volčič’s collective volume represents an important contribution to the field through its critical analysis of the relationship of pressure, cooperation, and competition between various civic actors, national political elites, and international bodies involved in the process of reckoning with the traumatic past in the Balkans. The wide range of empirical case studies presented in the book leads to a deeper understanding of several theoretical issues of transitional justice and civil society, although many are not formulated as such in the volume’s introduction. These include the relationship between civil society, justice, and the political misuse of the past; the ways nongovernmental organizations mediate the citizens’ expectations and understanding of the process of dealing with the past; the limits of regional transitional justice mechanisms in overcoming ethnic conflicts; and the particular features of civil society in the Balkan region.

Lavinia Stan’s and Despina Angelovska’s contributions respectively identify how civil society groups from Romania and Macedonia have been instrumental in keeping transitional justice on the public agenda and in designing methods for redressing human rights violations during the last two decades. They refer to the efforts of a variety of actors, such as victims’ associations, human rights foundations, and intellectual groups which have been systematically pressing local governments to adopt accountability measures. However, these fine analyses adopt a “heroic” perspective, where civil society actors are presented only in terms of their shared values and ideals, without analyzing their economic and political interests, which have significantly shaped their relationships with their respective regimes. The chapters do not discuss the politicized character of civil society actors in postcommunist Romania and Macedonia, and consequently fail to show the transformation of their pro-accountability activism into powerful political tools. A more heuristic perspective is offered by Arolda Elbasani and Artur Lipinski in their contribution on Albania. They emphasize how the weak and politicized civil society and the limited number of actors engaged in transitional justice processes have allowed
“economic and political exploitation of the past,” and “undermined a society-wide confrontation with the former communist regime” (106).

Another key issue addressed by the book is the relationship between domestic civil society, international organizations, and ordinary citizens within the process of reckoning with the past. In her contribution on Bosnia, Eunice Castro Seixas points out the fracture between NGOs and the Bosnian population, the former criticizing the latter for “its passivity, apathy and lack of participation in the social and political life” (75). The chapter also underlines the elitist attitude of the international NGOs in respect to local civil society groups, which are evaluated as “weak and inactive” according to the Western criteria of civic participation (75, 84). These discourses reveal that strategies of competition coexist with strategies of cooperation between national and international NGOs, and local societies as a whole. Elitist attitudes coupled with the lack of strong cooperation undermine a common understanding of the process of dealing with the past injustices. Moreover, the chapter by Briony Jones, Alex Jeffrey, and Michaelina Jakala on Bosnia argues that while the civic organizations may offer opportunities for various individuals to participate in transitional justice processes, these mechanisms are not necessarily emancipatory or inclusive. In this respect, the chapter shows, on the one hand, the positive role of local NGOs in communicating to large audiences the activities of the Bosnian War Crimes Chamber. On the other hand, it underlines their failure in establishing cooperation with the victims of wartime rape within the framework of a program planned to offer such victims access to social assistance.

In addition to these structural and theoretical issues, many contributions in the book analyze the role of “ethnicity” in regional and international cooperation. Arnoud Kurze and Iva Vukusic’s chapter on the Regional Commission Tasked with Establishing Facts about the War in former Yugoslavia (RECOM) examines the conflict between competing ethnic groups’ historical narratives about the war, which finally led to the partial failure of a regional truth commission in the Balkans. While Serbian NGOs were suspected of using RECOM for justifying Serbian aggression, conflicts emerged also between Bosnians and Croatians in respect to their part in the war. The different narratives regarding the genocide in former Yugoslavia caused disagreements between various RECOM members, many of which ultimately decided to boycott the commission. Although the commission succeeded in engaging thousands of people and sparked public debate about truth-seeking initiatives, ethnic conflicts and competing historical narratives undermined its goals.

The same idea is illustrated by Olivera Simić’s chapter, which analyzes a bilateral Bosnian-German project of symbolic reparation, meant to create a