Debate


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Robert Dahl opened his seminal book *Polyarchy* (1971: 1) with the question under what conditions a transition to a regime that allows for open and formal opposition to the government is possible. This question has been the primary focus of a number of influential studies of democratization during the 1980s and the 1990s (Diamond and Plattner 1993; Karl 1990; Held 1993; Huntington 1991; Linz and Stepan 1996; O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Przeworski et al. 2000: 88-141). What distinguishes *Embracing Democracy in the Western Balkans: From Postconflict Struggles toward European Integration* from other studies of democratization is its focus on the quality of democracy that has already been instituted, or the question under what conditions democracy is actually “embraced” or consolidated. Lenard Cohen and John Lampe, two renowned scholars in the field, address this question by systematically surveying and analyzing political and economic conditions in the Western Balkans, the region including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, during the first decade of the 21st century. One of the principal strengths of this book is the attention that the authors pay to the context-specific, or the regional historical, conditions that make democratic consolidation more or
less challenging. The book is, thus, not only a valuable resource for scholars interested in the region, but also for scholars interested in the general topic of democratization.

*Embracing Democracy* stands out from other scholarship on the region in its authors’ attempt to assess, using a wealth of empirical evidence, whether several theoretically relevant elements of democracy, such as institutions, the rule of law, civil society, political culture, and economic development, are present. Also, in its focus on the postconflict period and in avoiding a moralizing stance, this book presents a novel perspective on the study of democracy in the Western Balkans. The authors pose the following questions at the onset of their book: “How and to what extent has this particular postconflict region of the Western Balkans actually embraced the democracy that its leaders now formally endorse? More specifically, have the region’s institutions and populations evolved to support and accept pluralist values and political behavior to the extent necessary to make democracy self-sustaining? And finally, how have the region’s economies reconstructed themselves since the Communist era?” (Cohen and Lampe 2011: 3). Rather than providing an overarching answer to these questions, the authors, in their aim to evaluate the level of progress comparatively across the region, consider several different aspects of democracy and dedicate a chapter to each of the following areas: general institutional reforms, the institutionalization of the rule of law, the transformation of political culture, the development of political parties, and economic development.

This study, hence, contributes to democratization scholarship by employing the concept of “consolidation of democracy” in a multidimensional and nuanced fashion, similar to the way that Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan use the term in their classic book *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (1996). In a similar vein as Linz and Stepan, Cohen and Lampe take into consideration complexities and contradictions encountered in the local milieu. In other words, the authors do not provide readers with a neatly packaged answer to the question of whether democracy has consolidated itself as a stable regime, or whether it was “embraced,” in the authors’ words. Has democracy become the “only game in town” in the Western Balkans (Cohen and Lampe 2011: 9)? Probably it has, Cohen and Lampe argue, at least behaviorally and constitutionally, since there are currently no serious political challenges to the regime. But their answer is more qualified in the degree to which the “democratic consolidation” has been attained attitudinally in the Western Balkans, as reflected in the regional variation in