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Lenard J. Cohen and John R. Lampe have produced an enormous and useful book that attempts to summarize the most important political and economic developments in the “Western Balkans” since the transition from communism began. The name of this region is a strange figment of the European Union’s lively bureaucratic imagination – take the former Yugoslavia, subtract Slovenia and add Albania. This leaves us with the countries that aspire to obtain EU membership, a motley group which the authors nonetheless succeed in showing has much in common. The approach taken by the authors in the book’s nine chapters is thematic rather than country-by-country, allowing them to elicit productive comparisons across the region. Though the great majority of the text is focused on political aspects of transition, economic questions receive considerable focus, as one would suspect given Lampe’s many previous works on the economic history of the Balkans. The authors also cite and include a broad selection of demographic, sociological and economic data from organizations that monitor the region.

The authors define “embracing democracy” as a “dual process – not only one of establishing appropriate pluralist institutional frameworks and procedures but also one of growing public acceptance and trust in their legitimacy. Democracy must be both embraced and practiced[.]” (15) It is much easier to attain and prove *pro forma* adherence to the multitude of
principles and requirements that constitute a democratic society and a market economy (and that are set by the EU) than it is to internalize the underlying behavior and mentality that make implementation of these requirements possible in the long-term. The political parties in the former Yugoslavia may have embraced democracy as the “only game in town” – here the authors borrow Juan Linz and Adam Przeworski’s justifiably famous phrase. But the same political elites often concurrently attempt to perpetuate or foster a structure that makes them the only ones capable of winning the next round(s) of the game. Here the authors hit the nail on the head with their reference to Charles Tilly and the lack of actual implementation of reforms in “low-capacity democratic” regimes (165).

Transition in this book is treated as a process of political, social and economic transformation between two well-defined points. The point of departure for all the countries examined in the volume is the end of the communist party-state. The ostensible “end” of transition is the attainment of EU membership. Cohen and Lampe seem to endorse this trajectory, though they of course share the apparent and understandable doubts that have arisen since the international economic crisis began in 2008. Still, it would have been desirable to see a slightly more direct statement from the authors about whether they accept the “EU agenda” and the actions of EU elite actors or not. Certainly, they seem to regard the path towards EU membership as being in some ways distinct from the overall path towards democratization. The authors remark that “embracing democracy and embracing the EU at the same time, although they share the same standards, is not a single, seamless process” (388). Cohen and Lampe also correctly note that a gulf exists between the declarative acceptance and desire for EU membership among citizens of the region (though this is declining) and the willingness to undertake the reforms required by the EU (351).

One concern that seems valid about the EU integration process is the degree to which the EU adheres to the formal and rigorous requirements that it sets for candidates. Cohen and Lampe have comparatively little to say about policies of conditionality. The emphasis on the “embrace of democracy” as being one of practice rather than just form is one of the useful lessons of this book, and it confirms what Jelena Subotić has observed with respect to cooperation with the ICTY. At the same time, it is also clear that, far from being a cast-iron policy, the EU’s relationship to conditionality is often plagued by intense politicization (Subotić 2009). To take one example, the arrests of the ICTY fugitives Radovan Karadžić, Ratko Mladić