

I Balcani dopo le guerre. Ascesa e declino dell'intervento internazionale, by Roberto Belloni, Roma, Carocci, 2022, 256 pp., € 24.00 (paperback), ISBN: 978-88-29-00551-2.

Roberto Belloni has recently published the Italian translation of his original book, printed in English by Palgrave Macmillan. The study analyses Western intervention in the Yugoslav cultural space during and after the decade of the wars of succession (1991-2001), with a focus on the peacebuilding strategies adopted after 2000. In particular, Belloni describes the evolution of peacebuilding in the introductory part of the volume. Then, the narrative is developed over three parts. The first investigates the liberal ideology imposed on the design and implementation of the Dayton agreement. The second discusses the EU's attractiveness in the region, while the last part describes the local disappointments manifested by growing Euroscepticism, and stemming from widespread corruption and governance failure. In conclusion, the author raises the question of the inadequacy of the liberal paradigm and the need to replace it with a new, post-liberal approach, one able to rely on social and individual networks at the local level, with the aim of reinforcing public policies.

Essentially, the study offers a broad, critical overview of peacebuilding efforts in the Balkans. According to the author, the Yugoslav successor states suffered particularly from the external imposition, pursued mostly by the US, of liberal ideology, which was, to a large extent, reinforced by the (often-inconsistent) behaviour of the European Community, later European Union. In contrast, the international community, through the United Nations and other organizations like OSCE, essentially played a 'covering role', once the military actions of the Western powers had been replaced by peacebuilding implementation policies.

Belloni is forthright in elucidating his critique of key Western actors, whose conduct 'drastically altered' international norms concerning sovereignty in order to satisfy their security concerns. The outcome of this policy was a mix of 'paternalism and coercion', stemming from the deeply held liberal belief that peaceful coexistence can be assured by promoting the rule of law, democratic institutions, free trade, and participation of the new states in international organisations.

Within this framework, the book convincingly connects the different phases of peacebuilding with the NATO Strategic Concept of 1999. This document actually dominated the political and military behaviour of the West in Yugoslav territory, with far-reaching and unpredictable consequences. Not surprisingly, in fact, its approval by the heads of state and government occurred in April, that is when the illegal bombing of Serbia and Montenegro because of Kosovo was taking place. Ten years after the end of the Cold War, NATO's commitment to security took on a political role in conflict prevention and crisis management. In other words, the Alliance claimed to be a crucial (if not predominant or leading) international guarantor for enhancing cooperation, democracy and human rights not only in the expanding Euro-Atlantic area (never accurately defined), but also in the Balkans.

Consequently, the Western powers assumed that the re-building of the Balkans, based on liberal-democratic values, norms and practices, was possible if not 'inevitable'. By contrast, the beneficiaries of peacebuilding did not necessarily welcome the 'generous' educational intervention of the West. Rather, they often assumed that such behaviour was a form of neo-colonialism, aimed at legitimising Western interests. As a result, they often used democratic processes as means of strengthening their personal and group interests, therefore implementing, under different conditions, the strategies pursued in war periods by opposing nationalist tendencies.

In light of this challenging behaviour, the author has concentrated his analysis on the dynamics between the international/liberal, and the local dimension, both in terms of exercised power and civil society performance. By reconstructing the mechanisms of governance in the region, he has established that the dominant élites quickly manifested their considerable ability to adapt to the new situation, although

favouring illiberal approaches. In his investigation, in fact, Belloni convincingly shows how post-war corruption, clientelism, and ethno-authoritarianism flourished to such an extent that even the liberal international players had to come to terms with the local situation. After describing the effects of such a compromise on the Dayton 'liberal imposition' and its aftermath, Belloni spends a whole chapter on what he calls 'EUtopia', that is the fascination of EU officials with the EU integration process as a key mechanism able to emulate the process of Franco-German reconciliation. In this context, the author ascribes the emergence of a new consciousness, within EU member states, of the Balkans and the consequences of the 1999 Kosovo war. According to Belloni, they realised that strategies of conflict management had to be accelerated, paving the way for cooperation between the EU and NATO, while offering a pathway to integration to all the Yugoslav successor states. This happened, as is well known, during the Thessaloniki summit of 2003. However, what happened later is also well known. Although only Slovenia, and much later Croatia, were included in 'the club', 'absorption fatigue' experienced after the great enlargement of 2004 – in addition to the strengthening of the criteria for accession; local resistance to cooperation with the ICTY, and the determination of the Western authorities to negotiate (or impose) decisions on recalcitrant leaderships – did not lead to relevant changes at the local post-war context. In the medium term, neither the Bonn powers, nor the strategy of 'normalisation of Serbian-Kosovo relations' established the extent to which, if at all, the power of EU integration was really transformative.

Belloni develops further his investigation of the limits of peacebuilding strategies. Focusing on the endless postponement of the enlargement negotiations, he explains the growing Euroscepticism in the candidate or potential candidate countries in the Balkans in terms of a variety of factors, from the impact of the economic crisis of 2008 to the veto power subsequently exercised by Greece and Bulgaria; from the unsettled relations between Belgrade and Priština to those within Bosnia-Herzegovina. In addition, one should similarly add the difficulties of organising regional economic cooperation under the auspices of CEFTA, the SEECP and, recently, under the auspices of the new 'Open Balkan' project.

To sum up, Belloni admits a series of difficulties in the achievement of the main goals of peacebuilding, particularly those concerning the development of liberal institutions, civic coexistence, and a market economy. The initial ambitions of the external Western players had to come to terms with the local reality, dominated by a lack of transparency, by corruption, and by the decline of a convincing EU conditionality. For its part, the EU had gradually limited its expectations to security issues, while suggesting local co-ownership of the implementation of reform, often left undone. In the end, all these aspects explain the lack of democratic consolidation, despite the initial hopes placed in the strategy of liberal peacebuilding.

Such considerations are actually well rooted in the local and regional context and Belloni's analysis is solid and well structured. However, it seems to me that his arguments are missing one crucial aspect that requires more detailed consideration. This aspect concerns the role of nationalism, which is still underestimated, even though, ideologically it is the main source of the Yugoslav partition. In my view, Belloni does not insist enough on this aspect, failing to understand the most relevant reason for the peacebuilding debacle in the Balkans. Following the widespread narrative of the US and EU sources as well as the diplomatic actions of Western players in recent decades, Belloni concentrates his critical analysis on peacebuilding strategy, which, as a paradigm, was applied to the fragments of the partitioned states, rather than to the state in its entirety.

Nevertheless, the country which suffered from partition, violence and war crimes was Yugoslavia. Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, would never have suffered a war if Yugoslavia had been preserved and transformed into a democratic federation. This opportunity existed at least until the summer of 1990, but neither the leaders of the three main republics, nor the EC or the US were interested in exploring such an option, underestimating the divisive and destabilising power of nationalism. Lack of this awareness led to the failure of peacebuilding strategies, because the latter were deployed in the wrong context. Furthermore, growing local frustration with the lack of visible results contributed not only to depopulation, brain drain,

corruption and bad governance, but also to encouraging new, external players (such as Russia, Turkey, China or the Emirates) to penetrate the region, looking for niches of influence.

Such an interpretative framework offers new opportunities for analytical research in order to establish how detrimental the compromise between liberal peacebuilding and nationalism was. It might also help us to understand why peacebuilding policies have failed so far, and to what extent a 'post-liberal approach', which is advocated by Belloni in the last pages of his stimulating book, would have had a better chance if applied to a 'post-national context' in the Balkan case. Truly, if the rebuilding of Yugoslavia appears impracticable, the space it occupied is still marked by profound syncretism, which makes the region culturally and historically prepared to face the challenges of diversity, *if* the EU is able to enhance its communitarian dimension and operate consistently in the Balkans.

Meanwhile, 'modern nationalism', which was so violently pursued by the Yugoslav war lords in the 1990s, has been kept alive by their heirs and ultimately justified by sovereigntist behaviour. Actually, this is a dead-end street. The limited outcomes, if not the failure, of liberal peacebuilding are rooted in these socio-political and cultural constraints. In this sense, the conclusions of the Belloni's book offer, in my view, excellent arguments for further exploring peacebuilding developments in postliberal and post-national circumstances.

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