

FORUM

## Introduction: The Balkans

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This journal has in recent years published the *Spotlight* series, consisting of articles which each attempt to provide an overview of the historiographical landscape in various European countries and major themes in European history. The articles have highlighted methodological developments, significant debates, and risks and challenges to historical scholarship from hostile political directions. To date, the series has included profiles of Ukrainian, Norwegian, Albanian, Hungarian, Italian, Serbian and French history, as well as insightful overviews of right-wing populism, migration history, and environmental and global history.

Now, this forum returns to the region known variously as the Balkans or Southeastern Europe. Prominent scholars from Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Bulgaria have been enlisted to summarise important historiographical developments in their countries since the fall of communism.

Those who are familiar with the aforementioned articles on Ukrainian, Albanian and Hungarian historiography will recognise many of the trends and challenges identified by the contributors to the forum. Above all, history and historiography are – unfortunately – inextricably linked to issues of the ontological security of the nation-state. All these societies, since the early 1990s, have had to extricate themselves from collapsing communist party-states, a situation encompassing the implosion of funding for research, leading to existential challenges for historians and their institutions. Even as dogmatic Marxist scholarship with its rigidities fell by the wayside, scholars found themselves confronted by the sometimes even more restrictive straitjacket of nationalist agendas. In two of the countries featured here, this process also entailed protracted wars in which historians were both villains and heroes.

As has been seen elsewhere – for example, in Turkey after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire – a strange kind of amnesia ensued after amputation from previously existing polities. Overnight, scholars in countries like Croatia and Slovenia turned inwards, ignoring the fact that most of their states' histories lay embedded in that of Yugoslavia and other multinational empires. (Indeed, in Croatia, one nationalist historian even today denies in the face of logic and reason that it is possible to be a historian of Yugoslavia – after all, that state no longer exists!) In a period when these societies and their historiographies could have benefited from exposure to external ideas and methodologies, statist nationalist agendas instead fostered introversion. Not a few of those younger scholars who challenged the myopic obsession found themselves derided as traitors by those who view history and education as an obligatory patriotic endeavour.

The authors in this forum highlight these and many other common trends. All have experienced first-hand the struggles for the development of modern critical historiography and the costs that these battles impose upon those who refuse to conform to state-centric and nationalist dogmas. The contributors in North Macedonia and Bulgaria, who have both been involved in the mediation of a full-blown bilateral *Historikerstreit* that has seen Bulgaria scandalously block EU membership negotiations

for its neighbour, know better than anyone the risks involved. Among the stress, anxiety and furor of these debates, the authors also succeed in identifying points of light and promising new fields of historical inquiry in their countries.

Despite the setbacks and remaining challenges, readers should not hasten to jump to any conclusions regarding the particularly vulnerable state of Balkan historiography. Those of us who have been working on the Balkans for decades have in recent years found cause to wonder whether academic and other developments in the region are not so much recalcitrant remnants of weak states and fractured societies, but rather harbingers of worrying global trends. After all, within Europe, historians in virtually all countries have in recent years faced hostility and sharp criticism from politicians and on social media when pursuing topics that either include previously marginalised groups and/or challenge nationalist myths and agendas, colonial crimes and past atrocities committed in the name of the state. In my own country, Denmark, historians and other scholars have found themselves criticised by name in parliament for pursuing research that displeases some politicians. And, like our Balkan colleagues, we can all with an exasperated sigh recognise the disparagement of hard-earned expertise and scholarship by social media pundits and purveyors of crowd-pleasing ‘pulp history’. In sum, rather than documenting worrying and promising trends in an allegedly peripheral region, these inspiring scholars remind us how much we all as historians have in common across regions and with our fellow scholars from other disciplines. The struggle for objective and inclusive scholarship – like the fight for human rights and democracy – never ends.