

Review of the Thesis

Aleksandar Vanchoski, Region building in the Western Balkan and Visegrad countries – political and media discourse in Macedonia (TEMA Erasmus Mundus Master Course; Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, Budapest, Hungary and Department of World History, Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague, 2016, 97 pp.)

The presented thesis explores highly relevant and, given the contemporary migration crisis, also extremely topical issue of regionalization processes on the borders of the EU in the Balkan Peninsula. The thesis draws inspiration from the field of regionalization studies, and builds upon key assumptions of one particular approach developed within the field – the Paasi’s social-constructivist conceptualization of region formation, which starts from the imagining of the region as somehow bounded and unique territorial unit and moves through the stage of institutionalization (development of *identity of region*) to the fully developed region characterized by the establishment of *regional consciousness* among its inhabitants.

Vanchoski applies this constructivist model on the Western Balkans (WB) region, which has been rather instrumentally defined by the EU at the brink of the EU-enlargement of 2004 as “Balkan countries outside the EU” in order to secure peace in the aftermath of the Yugoslav Wars. In the introduction and following methodological chapters (1 and 2) Vanchoski demonstrates familiarity with all relevant authorities and major academic debates in the field. He develops a clear methodology, which serves his general purpose (although some reservation could be expressed – see below). The major research question of the thesis asks to what extent WB, after more than a decade of institutional existence, could be “considered a region” (p. 17) on the basis of Paasi’s model. In order to answer such a question, Vanchoski studies the discourse (speeches of government officials and mainstream printed media) on WB in one of WB member states (Macedonia - other countries has not been analyzed for reasons not stated in the thesis).

While this is a promising premise for an interesting and highly relevant research, Aleksandar does not fully exploit its potential. Vanchoski’s discourse analysis (chapt. 3.3 and 3.4; actually the empirical core of the thesis) lacks clear analytical focus and hardly ever goes beyond the discussion of official WB intergovernmental meetings. Generally speaking, it resembles a collection of excerpts rather than an analytical study. Instead of pointing out major conflicts and tensions concerning the use and content of the WB as a concept, Vanchoski settles for an extended chronological description of speeches and articles discussing intergovernmental cooperation efforts. Despite such deficiencies, Vanchoski clearly identifies security considerations and EU-entry negotiations as persisting goals fueling the support for WB as international cooperation framework among Macedonian politicians. Thus, he demonstrates that WB has become a part of “political and public discourse in Macedonia” (p.61; which, in the end, seems to be more of a premise for the research than its conclusion). Also, apparently contrary to his expectations, he finds evidence that the notion has mostly neutral rather than negative connotations in Macedonian print discourse (which is indeed interesting, given the fact that WB framework was at the beginning more-less imposed on WB countries by western

powers – not because the traditional European image of the Balkans is negative, as Vanchoski seems to argue).

The main analysis is then concentrated in the two final chapters. First (chapt.4) looks at the development of WB through the lens of Paasi's conceptualization of region formation. This is the strongest part of the thesis and here Vanchoski clearly describes the top-down formation of the new WB region in the context of EU enlargement policy. Unfortunately, this section rarely (if at all) refers to the findings presented in the previous chapter and builds predominantly on secondary literature, only tacitly and implicitly capitalizing on knowledge gathered in previous chapters.

The fifth and final chapter aims at making the comparison between the emergence and development of the WB region and that of Central Europe, in the EU enlargement policy epitomized mainly in the activities of the Visegrad group (VG). Vanchoski correctly (if implicitly) identifies the analytical potential of such comparison – VG was indeed formed as a response to EU enlargement policy in early 1990s and thus it set upon a similar path as WB, only a decade earlier. Since then, VG developed into a well institutionalized intergovernmental cooperation platform, with a fully developed identity of a region. While this comparison offers some interesting insights, if the discussion of similarities and differences between WB and VG was to achieve more profound results, it would require development of stronger analytical framework.

Final conclusions in a clear and concise manner summarize the main argument, that WB represents the case of the top-down constructed region in the making. Relatively successful development of identity of the region has not been so far coupled by the establishment of regional consciousness. On the other hand, the idea of WB cooperation remains strongly present in public discourse in one of participating countries, Macedonia.

Undeniably, the thesis suffers from several shortcomings. Starting with the not very ambitious general design, we can see that the final thesis falls rather short of the original plan presented at the beginning of the research. Simply testing if institutionalization of Western Balkans fits the general theory of regionalization as a social process (why it would not, providing that there are institutions using the label?), can hardly deliver interesting results. Furthermore, the declared aim of the author to compare development of the WB with VG region remains for the most part unfulfilled and does not go deeper than stating the obvious.

Furthermore, the narrative in general seems underdeveloped and fragmented. For instance, the structure of individual subchapters would immensely profit from inclusion of 1) more general discussion of the given topic in the opening paragraph and 2) short summary at the end. Consider for instance chapter 3.2 discussing the emergence of the WB as a region – the information that the concept has been coined as a byproduct of EU enlargement policy is hidden somewhere in the middle of the sixth paragraph. This lack of focus also leads sometimes to seemingly unsubstantiated claims appearing in the text as if haphazardly and out of the blue (see for instance the claim about the allegedly initially negative image of WB on page 31).

Another issue here is the formal part of the thesis, which struggles heavily to meet required academic standards. First, the language is not very good (sometimes hard to follow) – let's look for instance at the discussion of the notion of Balkans. One can only wonder why the author, in a work devoted to the development of Western Balkans, repeatedly uses interchangeably two versions of the titular region - Balkan and Balkans. Apparently, the latter seems to be the single correct alternative used for designation of the region. This goes as far as changing the title of what is perhaps the most influential work on the topic, Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans* (see footnote 47). Furthermore, this is not simply a spelling issue, but highly inappropriate and unfortunate conflation of two different analytical notions, which could easily lead to a misunderstanding (especially in chapter 3.1). The difference between the singular and plural version of the word denotes the distinction between clearly defined geographical units (as in Balkan Mountains or Balkan Peninsula) and the abstract term describing the region.

Second, references are often wrongly formatted (clearly the copy/paste issue) – see for instance the footnote 53 and empty lines in footnotes 76, 81, 130, 157, 183, 210, 225; online sources sometimes do not have the appropriate form (e.g. date accessed not specified, see footnote 223-244; sometimes incomplete URL – 58, 244; or utterly wrong URL – 59). Third, the reviewer sorely missed visual tools – maps etc. The only image, a table describing Paasi's concept of regional identity building on page 77, has such a low resolution that it would be better omitted.

All of this said, I have three questions that I would like Mr. Vanchoski to address:

- 1) How do works of Todorova and Scücz on discursive formation of eastern European regions, which span across several pages each in your thesis, contribute to your analysis, otherwise based upon Paasi?
- 2) Another issue reflects methodological problem, often found in this kind of descriptive analysis, generally referred to as *confirmation bias*: chosen theoretical and methodological assumptions frame the analysis in a way that enable only confirmative findings. If the existence of WB as a frame for intergovernmental organization was a premise and the starting point of your research, perhaps it would be more inspiring and fruitful to ask whether the establishment of intergovernmental WB cooperation led to other, less state-oriented spin-offs and forms of bottom-up cross-border cooperation (as briefly suggested in the conclusion). However, following Vanchoski's methodological choices, I would be interested in learning what exactly is the content of identity of WB region (in Paasi's terms)?
- 3) What conclusions can you draw from the comparison between WB and VG (they are not mentioned anywhere in the thesis).

Despite general sloppiness and minor methodological imperfections, the thesis satisfies relevant requirements and I recommend it for defense with a preliminary mark C, with possible up/down-grade depending on the author's performance at the defense.

Jíra Janáč Prague 8/6/2016

