

The Dynamics of Regional Identity-building in the Foreign Policies of the Western Balkans. Rethinking Agency and Embedded Peripherality

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The Western Balkans have long been perceived in mainstream IR as a region divided by the competing interests of external hegemonic actors, chiefly among them being Russia, China, Turkey, the USA, NATO and the EU. Ongoing intractable problems of nationalistic antagonism, revisionism, and hybrid regimes typified by competitive authoritarianism and state capture pose lasting challenges to achieving genuine political reconciliation and transformative justice. These challenges have left the region susceptible to conditions of liminality and external dependence, a set of conditions which have been sharpened by recent events, from the 'Refugee Crisis', to the Covid-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine. However, many accounts within mainstream IR reproduce top-down, often Eurocentric representations of the Western Balkans as a region merely defined by external interests and internal fragmentation, rather than a political unit in and of itself.

Featuring wide-ranging contributions from Dr. Avdi Smajljaj, Jan Niemiec, Tony Horne, Drs. Aleksandar Milošević & Miloš Hrnjaz and Drs. Sokol Lleshi & Marsela Sako, this panel seeks to engage in the endeavour of 'worlding' from the Western Balkans by exploring the various dimensions of how the region negotiates centre-periphery relations at the regional level. The papers contained within this panel critically examine this from two distinct, yet intersecting angles. These are the conflicting external interests of regional hegemons from the EU, Russia and Turkey which shape regional political outcomes on one hand and the internal dynamics of regional identity and institution building itself in the Western Balkans on the other. As such, the purpose of this is to not only re-centre South-Eastern European perspectives about foreign policy and regional cooperation, but also to generate theoretical and conceptual insights into the study of regionalism more broadly within IR and Area Studies along the continuum of centre-periphery relations.

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