

**STEPIĆ, MILOMIR. 2023. GEOPOLITICAL GLOSSARY OF THE BALKANS,
BELGRADE: CATENA MUNDI, 536 PP. (IN SERBIAN)**

**СТЕПИЋ, МИЛОМИР. 2023. ГЕОПОЛИТИЧКИ ПОЈМОВНИК БАЛКАНА,
БЕОГРАД: CATENA MUNDI, 536 С.**

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Abstract

This review examines the lexicon *Geopolitical Glossary of the Balkans* by Milomir Stepić, published in 2023 by Catena Mundi (Belgrade, Serbia). The volume provides an encyclopedic overview of key topics shaping the geopolitical context of the Balkans. Although written from a distinctly Serbian perspective, it offers readers an essential reference work that illuminates a wide range of regional geopolitical issues.

Keywords: *Geopolitics, Glossary, Balkans, Serbia, Southeast Europe.*

The publication under discussion is a reference work, comprising 536 pages of brief entries that address life in Southeast Europe. The jacket copy positions it as a scholarly overview, the first such work in Serbian to depict the reality of the Balkans. This framing also signals its anchoring in a distinctly Serbian geopolitical perspective. The author, Milomir Stepić, is a geographer with extensive knowledge of economics and politics, positioning him well to compile a reference work on such a complex region as Southeast Europe.

The concise, two-and-a-half-page preface explains the publication's background, thematic context, and the distinctive characteristics of Southeast Europe. Historically, major European powers have repeatedly attempted to advance their interests in the region, resulting in a complex, dynamic, and conflict-ridden geopolitical landscape (p. 7). Furthermore, it becomes evident that global political actors continue to test the limits of their power and compete for influence in this geographical area (ibid.). Given that this is a multidimensional and highly heterogeneous cultural landscape, the selection of entries for inclusion already poses a fundamental challenge. Consequently,

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the work assumes an encyclopedic character; nonetheless, the problem of territorial delineation remains unresolved (p. 8). This is noted by, among others, Balkanologist Predrag Mutavdžić, who explores in detail various approaches to the (imagined) demarcation of Southeast Europe (Mutavdžić 2013, 29).

Stepić goes on to address the conspicuous fact that, despite negative stereotypes associated with this region (p. 8), the term “Balkans” was chosen for the book’s title rather than “Southeast Europe”.

It is to be expected that a Serbian reference work would place a notable emphasis on the former Yugoslavia. Such emphasis is also motivated by the specific nature of this now-defunct state itself, in which “ethno-engineering” was practiced and new “instant nations” were proclaimed (*ibid.*). Crucially, however, these processes affected not only the former Yugoslavia but also other states in the region, and, to the politicized recognition of several new languages in place of a single, variegated linguistic continuum. For instance, whereas before the dissolution of Yugoslavia, there was talk of a “Serbo-Croatian” or “Croato-Serbian” language, today one largely speaks of Serbian and Croatian, in addition to Bosnian and Montenegrin—all based on the same dialectal foundation. Another example is the debate surrounding the status of Macedonian, which in Bulgaria is still often considered a variant of Bulgarian. Explaining additional attempts to develop other smaller linguistic varieties yet further increases the complexity of this picture, all of which illustrates why Southeast European anthropology, demography, ethnography, history, geography, and politics are so distinct within the European context, as are the region’s underlying spatial structures. It also shows, however, that geopolitical processes in this area continue to exert a lasting influence on linguistic sensitivities.

Following the volume’s introductory remarks, a table of contents (pp. 11–23) lists the volume’s individual entries, a selection of which warrants closer examination. Even at a glance, it is evident that the book’s focus is on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, with considerably more specialized information on this region than on countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, or Albania. It is therefore instructive to first examine specific territorial details and related aspects. For one, the Montenegrins are characterized as a “typical instant nation”, separated from the Serbs in order to weaken Serbia’s role in many respects (p. 503). This background also explains why Montenegrin is referred to here as a “so-called language” (p. 504). The discrepancy between linguistic and ethnic self-identification in Montenegro is noteworthy: while the majority identify as ethnic Montenegrins, most designate their language as Serbian (*ibid.*). This dynamic is unique within the former Yugoslavia and fundamentally differs from that of the other successor languages of Serbo-Croatian. Unlike Montenegro, however, Serbia has not recognized Kosovo as a state. Here, too, the volume’s Serbian geopolitical perspective makes itself known: Kosovo is still considered an autonomous province (Serbian: “аутономна покрајина”) and therefore an integral part of Serbia (p. 276).

Beyond territorial aspects, the work addresses ethnic aspects by cataloguing the major communities living in Southeast Europe. These include titular nations such as Croats, Albanians, and Turks. A closer look at these three groups reveals that they live not only within their respective states but also beyond their current borders.

Consequently, the phenomenon of cross-border settlement areas is central to understanding regional demographics. Croats, for example, constitute an extensive community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while compact Albanian settlements are found in southern Montenegro (Giesel 2023), and Bulgaria is home to a large Turkish minority. While the geopolitical perspective points to the current economically and expansionistically motivated concept of the “return of Turkey to the Balkans” (p. 462), it must also be noted that the region’s Turkish minority has often been a pawn in geopolitical power struggles (Hacı 2022). This dynamic naturally also applies to other stateless minorities discussed in the book, such as the Bunjevci in Serbia, Croatia, and Hungary (p. 99), the Gorani in Albania and Kosovo (p. 163), the Pomaks in Turkey, Bulgaria, and Greece (p. 366), and the Aromanians in Greece, North Macedonia, and Albania (p. 500), to name just a few.

Ultimately, the volume serves as a valuable resource for understanding the Serbian geopolitical perspective on the reality of Southeast Europe. It contains a wealth of entries, compiled and curated with scholarly rigor over several years. Engaging with its findings facilitates a deeper understanding of Southeast Europe and, above all, reveals the rationale behind its specific geopolitical viewpoint. A comparison against equivalent works from Turkey, Greece, Croatia, or Bulgaria would undoubtedly reveal divergences, yet this is precisely where the publication’s added value lies: it consolidates the current state of knowledge on topics subject to culturally specific geopolitical interpretations. It is undoubtedly worthwhile to engage with this perspective, though ideally in dialogue with others, in order to gain a nuanced overview of this highly heterogeneous region of Europe. In this endeavor, the book under discussion makes a significant contribution.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this review.

Ethical standards

The author affirms that this research did not involve human subjects.

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