

ACADEMIC CHRONICLE

A report on the panel discussion: *Balkans – “the soft underbelly of Europe”?* Lodz, November 21, 2016

The Research Centre of the University of Lodz (further on: UŁ) “Balkans at the turn of the 20th and 21st century” was founded in June 2011. The idea of its creation was born during a nation-wide conference *Bosnia and Herzegovina 15 years after Dayton: the past, the present and the future*, organized in Lodz, Poland in December 2010 by the Department of the History of Eastern Europe of UŁ. The participants of this meeting recognized the need to establish an interdisciplinary academic center which would coordinate and organize the research into the issues of the former Yugoslav federation, its dissolution, as well as the functioning of new states in the so-called Western Balkans. The founder and first manager of the Center was Prof. Paweł Chmielewski.

In 2011, in cooperation with the Lodz University Press, the Center began a new publishing series “Balkany XX/XXI”, the first publications of which were: a collective work entitled *Bosnia and Herzegovina 15 years after Dayton: Past – Present – Perspectives. Studies and Drafts* edited by P. Chmielewski and Sławomir Lucjan Szczesio and a Polish-English monograph written by Jan Muś and Marta Szpala. *Chorwacja w Unii Europejskiej = Croatia in the European Union*.

The other undertakings of the Center, headed by Prof. Chmielewski, included two large interdisciplinary conferences devoted to the 20th anniversary of the breakup of Yugoslavia (December 2011, with nearly 40 speakers) and to the functioning of the so-called Western Balkans in the system of Euro-Atlantic security (May 2013). Many prominent Balkans experts took part in these meetings, including Profs Ewa Bujwid-Kurek, Tadeusz Czekalski, Irena Stawowy-Kawka, Marek Waldenberg, Wiesław Walkiewicz, Jacek

Wojnicki, Michał Jerzy Zacharias. At the conference in 2011, which the Ambassador of the Republic of Croatia, Ivan Del Vechio, honored with his presence, participants called on the Polish authorities and leaders of the European Union (further on: the EU) to continue decisive steps towards greater integration of all the Balkan states with the EU.

In 2013, four more books of the series were published by the Center: a joint publication *The Western Balkans: Between the past and the future* edited by P. Chmielewski and S.L. Szczesio, and monographs: *National myths and their role in shaping politics on the example of countries of the former Yugoslavia* by Magdalena Reksć, *The party system of the Kingdom of Romania: Conditions and functioning* by Andrzej Dubicki as well as *The system of governance in the Republic of Croatia* by Konrad Składowski.

Then, on July 25, 2013, Prof. Paweł Chmielewski, the center manager, passed away unexpectedly, having lived only 67 years. As Wojciech Szczepański Ph.D. observed: “The community of the Balkans experts in Poland will remember him... first and foremost, as the organizer of valuable initiatives in Lodz, aimed at exploring the most recent history and the present situation of the Western Balkans”¹.

The Center, now led by Prof. Konrad Składowski, continued its activity by organizing, among other things, the next academic conference *Serbia – from the breakup of Yugoslavia to the European Union?* (May 2016) and by preparing another publication from the series “Bałkany XX/XXI”, which was dedicated to the memory of Prof. Chmielewski.

On November 21, 2016, in the club 6. Dzielnica in Lodz, the UŁ Research Center “Balkans at the turn of the 20th and 21st century” organized a panel discussion *Balkans – “the soft underbelly of Europe”?*, combined with the promotion of the book entitled *The Western Balkans in the Euro-Atlantic security system* edited by Albin Głowacki and S.L. Szczesio. On the publication itself as well as the current issues, challenges and threats for the Balkans discussed: the representatives of UŁ – Prof. K. Składowski, M. Reksć Ph.D. and S.L. Szczesio Ph.D. (academic secretaries of the Center) and a political scientist from the Jagiellonian University, Rafał Woźnica Ph.D. Tomasz Lachowski Ph.D. (UŁ) chaired the meeting.

¹ W. Szczepański, *In Memoriam. Paweł Chmielewski (1 IV 1946 – 25 VII 2013)*, “Balcanica Posnaniensia. Acta et studia” 2013, vol. XX, p. 231.

The panel started with the Center representatives delivering a presentation on the person of Prof. Chmielewski as well as on the activity of the Research Center in Lodz, which deals with the region of Balkans, including the organized conferences and the series of publications. Next, the co-editor and co-author of the latest publication (already the 7th), S.L. Szczesio Ph.D., talked about the idea behind the creation of his work and about its contents. The volume with nearly 670 pages contains the papers by 23 researchers from Poland and abroad (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy) – historians, political scientists, lawyers, ethnologists, terrorism experts. Their works cover the issues such as: the role of the region in the Euro-Atlantic security system, organized crime in the Balkans, problems in the functioning of individual states created on the ruins of the Yugoslav federation – 25 years after the disintegration of the country in the early nineties of the 20th century. In the introduction, the editors expressed their hope that the book would turn out to be “up-to-date and interesting reading” and that it would “encourage reflection, allow for formulation of postulates and conclusions which could help to at least partially solve the pressing problems of the Western Balkan countries”².

T. Lechowski Ph.D., the chair of the meeting, noted that, while speaking of the Balkans, we tend to think of the post-Yugoslav states. But what about the Eastern Balkans? At that time, R. Woźnica Ph.D. pointed out that Bulgaria and Romania have been members of NATO since 2004, and since 2007 of the EU. Although the participation of Sofia and Bucharest in the Euro-Atlantic structures has brought about many positive changes in their countries, the authorities are constantly struggling with numerous problems, such as corruption or organized crime. Law enforcement agencies are not too active in capturing and punishing perpetrators. According to R. Woźnica, the fight against these threats should involve not only the modification in legislation and the optimization of activities of state institutions, but also comprehensive operations in combating organized crime.

The following speaker, Prof. Składowski, emphasized that the ex-Yugoslav states differ when it comes to their presence in the Euro-Atlantic structures, as Slovenia and Croatia are already in NATO and the EU, whereas the remaining countries of the region

² A. Głowacki, S.L. Szczesio, *Od Redakcji*, [in:] *Balkany Zachodnie w systemie bezpieczeństwa euroatlantyckiego*, eds eorundem, Łódź 2015, pp. 16–17.



1. Panelists (from left): Magdalena Reksć Ph.D., Tomasz Lachowski Ph.D. (the moderator), Sławomir Lucjan Szczesio Ph.D. (from the collections of S.L. Szczesio)

– not yet. The Center manager also discussed the main problems in the political system of the Republic of Croatia and the current political situation in the country. In September 2016 an early election took place, resulting in a victory of the conservative Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). Far-reaching changes have occurred in Croatia since it gained independence. One example is the 1990 Constitution, which was amended several times, leading to deep transformations in the then system. It makes an extremely compelling field of research for historians, political scientists and lawyers. As claimed by Prof. Składowski, the changes in Croatia, a full-fledged member of the EU, are being closely watched by other countries of the region that also aspire to be included in the EU structures.

The involvement of the superpower United States in the Balkans could not be overlooked in the discussion. S.L. Szczesio Ph.D. recalled the role of the Americans in the ending of conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Croatia in 1995 (e.g.: Richard Holbrooke’s “shuttle diplomacy”; unofficial support for the anti-



2. The presentation by the Center manager Prof. Konrad Składowski (first on the left), Rafał Woźnica Ph.D. (UJ), Magdalena Rekść Ph.D. and Tomasz Lachowski Ph.D. (from the collections of S.L. Szczesio)

-Serbian coalition; bringing about the agreement between the warring sides in Dayton), and in Kosovo in 1999. M. Rekść Ph.D. also made a reference to the current situation in the US and in the Balkan states after Donald Trump's election. Some politicians and political observers, especially in Slovenia, hope that the new US administration will regard the region with favor and count on the endorsement of Melania Trump, the spouse of the current American leader. The first lady was born and raised in Slovenia, one of the six Yugoslav republics of the time. Later, M. Rekść Ph.D. drew attention to the problems of those Balkan states which in 2014 were affected by a natural disaster, the flood. However, the drama of the thousands of Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian citizens prompted grassroots initiatives, bringing help and support to those in need, transcending national or religious divisions.

The participants of the debate also tried to answer the moderator's question whether the relations between the post-Yugo-

slav states are stabilized, or there is still a threat of “the return of demons from the past” and “the Balkan barrel of gunpowder”? On the one hand, Bosnian Serbs seek total independence of the Republika Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina; on the other hand, the supranational cooperation forums of the ex-Yugoslav states are frequently being mentioned. The independence of Kosovo, the relations between Serbs and Albanians or the situation in Macedonia are some of the on-going problems. The hopes of the Balkan countries to improve their situation with, among other things, the accession process to the Euro-Atlantic structures are dampened by the problems in Brussels, e.g. Brexit. What is more, the panelists expressed their skepticism about the chances of the Balkan countries to be included in the European Community any time soon.

The discussion was joined in by the listeners who wondered whether after over 20 years since the 1995 agreement that had finished the war, it would be possible to reach “Dayton 2”, which would mean re-negotiating the future of the said countries and the new rules for their functioning, and to what extent the Balkans can be influenced by events in the Eastern Europe, such as conflicts over the Crimea or in the Caucasus.

Undoubtedly, the discussion, which was attended by more than 30 people, including students and academics, also from outside Lodz, demonstrated a constant interest in the Balkan issues and allowed to present the achievements of the UŁ Research Centre “Balkans at the turn of the 20th and 21st century”, along with the next book from the publishing series. The lack of total internal stability, the geopolitical challenges that the region’s states are facing and the “baggage of the past” will certainly create opportunities for further publications as well as meetings of scientific and popular scientific character, and talks on the future of the Balkan Peninsula.

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