

BOOK REVIEW SECTION

Gekić, H., Bidžan-Gekić, A., Drešković, N., Mirić, R. and Reményi, P.: *The Geography of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Between East and West*. Cham, Springer, 2022. 413 p.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a place of symbolic importance in the history of Europe. It is the place of encounters of peoples, religions, nations, and interests. However, these encounters often involved tensions, so the place the name represents was also associated with war conflicts. We associate it with wars in our minds because of the events of the last century. Whether it was the First World War, the great conflict of the beginning of the 20th century, or the Yugoslav War at the end of the century, the tiny country became the scene of tragic events in recent European history. Its inhabitants had to suffer the horror of genocide, too.

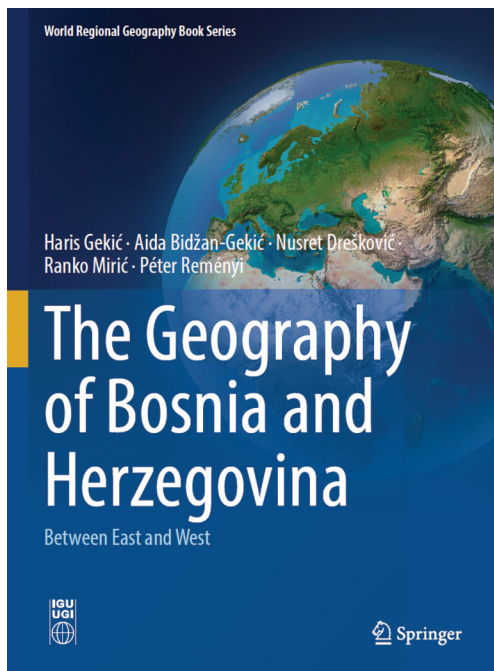
How does this country heal the wounds of the past in the 21st century? Can coexistence succeed after such a prelude? Could the bridge rebuilt in Mostar really be a symbol of finding each other, starting over, and reconciling? The public can be curious about these critical questions, and science can research the answers. We have these questions when we pick up this book and wait for the answers from the discipline of geography.

Especially because the subtitle of the volume (*Between East and West*) suggests precisely this connection (or its ambivalent realization), the country's intermediate position while placing it with an area of barely 50,000 km² and a population of nearly 4 million in a global context.

The above figures can also be found in the book since, according to the main title (*The Geography of Bosnia and Herzegovina*), the volume presents the country's geographical characteristics. Accordingly, the authors of the volume are all geographers. Most of them are employees of the University of Sarajevo, joined by a Hungarian author from the University of Pécs. The careful, detailed, and systematic presentation of the geographical features of Bosnia and Herzegovina can also be interpreted as part of a larger project. The volume published in 2022 is one of the publisher's regional geography series launched in 2015 (World Regional Geography Book Series). According to the publisher's website, 15 volumes have been published, including titles about some Balkan countries.

The impressive aim of the series is to show interested readers the regional geography of the world. On the one hand, this indicates the volume's methodology. Based on the characteristics of descriptive regional geography, we can obtain information about areas that form a unit based on specific characteristics and are separated from other areas. It is obvious in the case of this kind of geographical series that the political entities, the countries, demarcate the area to be investigated – as we can see in the current volume. At the same time, some titles in this book series, apparently only in the case of other continents than Europe, describe a group of countries instead of a single country, which means their geographical scope is very heterogeneous regarding areal extension, although they always focus on macroregions, i.e., countries and groups of countries. Another feature of the book series, at least its already published volumes, is the overrepresentation of European countries (9 volumes out of 15). This unevenness may arise from the geographical location of the publisher (Switzerland in Europe) and may change with future volumes.

Another characteristic of the book series is the prominent presence of the Balkan countries. In addition to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Serbia (cf. DEMETER, G. 2024), and Slovenia also appear in separate volumes. That does not necessarily reflect a specific territorial focus. Rather the presentation of these countries fills a gap among regional geographical works. That resonates with the objectives of the International Geographical Union (IGU), the collaborating partner of the book series, an



international organization aiming to support geography as a scientific discipline, spread geographical knowledge widely, and promote the teaching of geography.

All of this may be important information for those who pick up this volume. The readers receive a handbook that contains detailed information according to the taxonomy of descriptive regional geography. The characteristics of this system are as follows. First, the investigated area is placed in the geographical space with the most basic geographical data (absolute and relative position, vertical and horizontal extent). After that, the physical and social geographical features are sharply demarcated from each other. The following sequence enumerates physical geographical features. It starts with the geological history of the territory, following the most significant geological events based on the geological time scale. The current morphological features of the given surface follow this information, i.e., the characteristics of climate, hydrogeography, and biogeography, along with the features of soils. The next major section focuses on human geographical features, mainly population geography, social geography, and economic geography, whereas political geography (the presentation of historical events and political features related to the area) and urban geography are also prominent elements. The quantitative predominance of socio-geographical information is usually typical. The description ends with the characteristics of the smaller territorial units within the given region. That means a shift from the macroscale to mesoregions and taking a complex point of view by combining physical and human geographical features of the given area.

The book provides a classic regional geographical characterization of the country. Its advantage is that it offers a comprehensive and complex picture with the help of various research aspects of geography. It provides a great opportunity to get to know the geographical characteristics of an area. Its systematic point of view makes the volume suitable for use as a handbook and a textbook, too.

This kind of scientific work also allows one to move away from negative war connotations mentioned in the introduction. It discusses the social problems of the past as part of a more extensive and complex geographical system, thus, enabling the reconsideration of information. The authors also want to rethink Bosnia and Herzegovina from alternative points of view, as they predict in the *Preface*. As much as possible, they would like to move the country away from the war narrative and present it from perspectives that emphasise the opportunities. Therefore, using the discourses of geography, with particular emphasis on its regional perspective, the authors present the results of many years of research in this book, including numerous field observations. They emphasise the importance of economic, social, and political factors, which were prioritised in the exploration of regional characteristics, so they predict for the reader the proportions of the appearance of regional geographical features in the volume.

The volume was intended for comprehensive use. According to the *Preface*, the authors wanted to create a handbook about Bosnia and Herzegovina that also functions as a textbook and is not only for scientists, teachers, and students practicing geography. The goal was to explore the country's geographical reality, especially its physical and anthropogenic beauties. That is both an opportunity and a limitation. The country's removal from the war narrative is apparent, but it also results in dichotomic simplifications, as it happens in the title and introduction (e.g., West and East, nature and society, city and countryside).

The table of contents following the introduction immediately helps the reader navigate the structure of the volume and its primary content. The book consists of five large parts, followed by an index. The latter helps use the volume like a handbook. The content of the individual parts was written in the spirit of classic regional geographical descriptions. The first part presents the absolute and relative geographical position of Bosnia and Herzegovina in two chapters. The second part collects the physical geographical features of the country in six chapters. The third part shows the country's general demographical, social, urban, and political characteristics in four chapters. The fourth part discusses economic features separately in two chapters. Finally, the fifth part discusses the different parts of the country in a complex manner in one chapter focusing on its geographical regions. The volume is clearly characterized by the predominance of human geographical characteristics, especially economic geographical characteristics.

The volume, therefore, consists of 15 chapters. At the beginning of each chapter, the abstract and related keywords summarise the chapter's content. The subsections help to divide the content, which is made more visible by figures and tables. Each chapter end with a list of literature related to the given topic. Although the length of the abstracts and the number of references is varied, the chapters' layout help the readers navigate the information.

Charts, photographs, and tables are excellent tools for acquiring knowledge, and fortunately, we can find many of them in the volume. At the same time, neither the authors nor the publisher sought an exact layout for these. The mainly map-based figures are of very different quality, often with a surprisingly simple and less informative way of representation and content. Their size varies greatly. The simplicity of the content does not justify the large size of most of the figures, and there are also cases when it is the other way around, with the information-rich figure becoming challenging to interpret due to the small size or inappropriate font size. Hence, the layout of the figures is very heterogeneous, which unfortunately reduces the quality of the publication and the possibilities of its use as a textbook. It is especially disturbing that the figures almost always alternate from the two-column layout but rarely fill the entire page (from this point of view, the human geography chapters are more exact as they strive to fill the space more

proportionately). The size of the photographs is also extremely varied, and in most cases, the size was not chosen based on the content. The layout of the figures changes from chapter to chapter, but not for the sake of usability. In a publication that fills gaps and provides detailed information, such a composition of the ratio of the illustration to the text is the weakness of the volume.

The first part (*Geographical Position, Borders and Size*) is only a fraction of the entire volume. The book's first chapter (*Geographical Position, Spatial Coverage, and Size*) provides a comprehensive picture of the absolute and relative geographical position of the country, illustrating the content with colourful figures and tables. The figures here are conspicuously large and less informative compared to their content. In the second chapter we can read about the country's borders. The short chapter illustrates the content with pictures, which, in turn, are smaller than the map-based figures in the previous chapter, even though they could have been more effective.

The second part (*Physical Geography*) is divided into longer chapters. The third chapter (*Geology and Geotectonics*) presents the country's geological characteristics. It is extremely rich in map-based figures and photos, but the quality of the figures is uneven. Moreover, the legend of the maps is only helpful to the experienced eye. The fourth chapter (*Geomorphology*) focuses on the versatility of the earth's surface, presenting the natural geographical beauties of the country and illustrating them with colourful photos. The fifth chapter (*Climatology*) discusses the country's climatic characteristics in detail. A series of charts help to illustrate the content, as do the map-based figures in which, however, the legend is often very small or difficult to decipher. In the sixth chapter (*Hydrography*), we can learn the hydrographic features, where larger images reveal the richness and beauty of the surface waters. The seventh chapter (*Pedogeography*) introduces the reader to the soil types, and the eighth chapter (*Biogeography*) presents the country's flora and fauna. The map-based representation in this chapter has finally been created in a more consistent layout and size, while there are relatively few photos, despite the opportunities offered by the topic, and they are specifically related to protected areas.

With the third part of the book, we enter the world of human geography. The ninth chapter (*Historical Geography*) summarizes the main historical events related to the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina in chronological order, dividing the country's history into events that occurred before and since the 20th century. In addition to the informative and well-arranged illustrations, two map-based illustrations taking up the entire page width complete the story told in grandiose historical perspectives.

The tenth chapter (*Political Geography*) provides detailed information on the country's administrative and political system. The figures also really fill the space here, but there is often little information on them. In the eleventh chapter (*Population Geography*), richly illustrated with map-based figures, we get a

comprehensive picture of the country's population dynamics and structure regarding age, gender, ethnic and religious composition, and economic activity. The exceptional merit of this chapter is that it also covers the changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The twelfth chapter (*Urban and Rural Geography*) presents the geographical features of settlements in Bosnia and Herzegovina along the different characteristics of cities and countryside, with a large number of map-based figures and a series of photographs showing the characteristics of the settlement network.

The fourth part is entirely devoted to the economic geographical features of the country. The thirteenth chapter (*Natural Resources*) presents the natural resources by reinterpreting the physical geographical features that have already been discussed in detail. The fourteenth chapter (*Economic Development*) interprets the economic processes in the narrative of economic development. Among the economic sectors, services and mainly tourism play a prominent role. The chapter also presents the country's touristic regions, although the latter would fit more into the next part of the book.

The fifth part (*Geographic Regions of Bosnia and Herzegovina*) is the final one in the volume. Here, the fifteenth chapter (*Geographic Regionalization and Regions*) presents a complex regional geographical description of the country's mesoregions, richly illustrated with photographs.

The volume is a handbook for anyone who wants to get comprehensive knowledge about Bosnia and Herzegovina or expand or update their knowledge. It can be helpful for teachers and students alike, not only in geography but also in economics courses. The individual parts and chapters organize the information well. The content is created through the construction and application of extensive databases and can be considered an inexhaustible source of information. The figures follow a heterogeneous design, but their informativeness and attention-grabbing character are indisputable. The book offers a beautiful tour of Bosnia and Herzegovina with relevant and profound information.

MARGIT KŐSZEGI¹

REFERENCE

DEMETER, G. 2024. Manić, E., Nikitović, V., Djurović, P. (eds.): The Geography of Serbia: Nature, People, Economy. A book review. *Hungarian Geographical Bulletin* 73. (1): 106–108. <https://doi.org/10.15201/hungeobull.73.1.8>

¹ ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Humanities, Institute of Historical Studies, Department of Cultural History, Budapest, Hungary. E-mail: koszegi.margit@btk.elte.hu