Olivera Simić and Zala Volčić have brought together scholars from different countries and disciplines to map the role of civil society in transitional justice processes in the Balkans. This book sheds light on transitional justice processes in the Balkans and provides a detailed assessment of the strengths and the constraints of local mechanisms, such as truth commissions, material and symbolic reparations, lustration, trials and public apologies. In twelve case studies the authors discuss the role and involvement of civil society in the post-communist transitions in Albania, Macedonia and Romania as well as in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia after the breakup of Yugoslavia. Even though the overriding theme is the involvement of civil society in transitional justice processes, the authors also skilfully illustrate the diversity of civil society in the region, discuss the competition between different non-government organisations, identify divisions between organisations based in and outside the cities, analyse sometimes dubious relations between non-government organisations and governments, and highlight different management and financial problems that a civil-society faces over time.

Despina Angelovska attracted my interest with a very interesting chapter on Macedonia. She focuses on lustration as one of the most frequent forms of transitional justice in post-communist Europe. While lustration is implemented by state authorities, civil society organisations in the Balkan have been actively engaged in the process of lustration at different stages, albeit with limited success. Macedonia implemented lustration through two main laws aimed at disclosing the communist regime’s crimes: the Law on Handling Personal Files, 2000 and the Law on the Establishment of an Additional Condition for the Performance of Public Office, 2008. According to Angelovska, these laws failed because lustration often led to political revenge. Angelovska concisely presents faults in lustration’s application. For instance, in Macedonia, some secret files were falsified in order to discredit the member of Democratic Union for Integration Party (the Albanian political party).
Lustration turned into a tool for discrediting political opponents and, as Angelovska said, became an object of distrust and a parody. As a result she wonders if proper lustration is possible in a society where political party affiliation is more important to office-holding than professional expertise and experience. Like Angelovska, Lavinia Stan explores the same question in her chapter on Romania. Stan portrays problems of party affiliation in the process of lustration in Romania. Discussing the Romanian Senate’s amendments to the Bill on Access to Files, Stan points out that that “personal files were made public only if their contents did not endanger national security, which was exclusively defined by the Romanian Information service, recognised for its vested interest in keeping as many files as possible out of the public eye” (24).

However, the problem of political partisanship is not the only problem of lustration in the Balkans. Angelovska further highlights that “the greatest failure of Macedonian lustration ... is that it has completely put aside victims” (61). Relaying on the opinion of the Macedonian civil society activist Zarko Trojanovski, Angelovska agrees that, by focusing on informants and collaborators, lustration, in the long-term, leads to the oblivion of the victims. In Trojanovski’s opinion, the nature of transitional justice is not understood if victims’ needs are not recognised and, thus, lustration has to be complemented by some other transitional justice mechanisms. Similarly, when describing transitional justice mechanisms in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Briony Jones, Alex Jeffrey and Michaelina Jakala recognise that it is crucial to understand and constantly ask the question “for whom does transitional justice take place?” (89). In all of the countries featured in this volume, civil society actors have been strong advocates for the process of lustration but, at the same time, civil society representatives have tried to ensure transitional justice processes are victim-centred.

Most of the other chapters discuss the mechanisms civil society organisations employed in order to increase awareness about the victims’ needs and to make sure their voice is recognised. For instance, Olivera Simić describes how the Pillar of Shame project, which was implemented by the Center for Political Beauty, a non-
profit organisation from Berlin, aimed to remind the world about the victims of the Srebrenica genocide and the UN’s failure to prevent this atrocity. Further, two pairs of authors (Arnaud Kurze and Iva Vukisic and Jill Irvine and Patrice McMahon) analyse the transnational civil society network Coalition for RECOM which was a campaign to set up a Commission that would be tasked with establishing facts about the War (1991-2001). These analyses explored thoroughly the successes and limitations of this joint initiative of three non-government organisations from Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia taking into consideration victims’ perspective and needs. Following the same line, other authors illustrate and elaborate on many other victims-centred aspects of civil-society engagement: structured encounters of Serbs and Albanians (Orli Fridman), gender aspects of transitional justice (Michael Potter and Hedley Abernethy), public apologies (Tamara Banjeglav) and public awareness raising campaigns (Jamie Rowen).

I recommend this book to scholars unfamiliar with the processes of transitional justice in the Balkans. Even scholars and stakeholders who are already familiar with those processes in the Balkans will find some chapters enlightening because the book raises very important issues which need to be addressed by civil societies that are yet to deal with the past human rights violations. Further, the book highlights not only the need for different transitional justice mechanisms to be complementary (as it is brilliantly exemplified by Tamara Banjeglav in her case study about Croatia), but also for the government and non-government actors to work together. This volume significantly contributes to the existing transitional justice literature covering both ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom up’ processes of transitional justice and of civil society involvement in the Balkans.

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