

Michael R. Palaret. 2015. *Macedonia: A Voyage through History*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Trajche Panov  
Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies  
European University Institute Florence

*Macedonia: A Voyage through History* from Michael Palaret offers a detailed, extensive overview of the history of Macedonia. In this rather ambitious project, Palaret attempts to discuss the historical developments on the territory of Macedonia covering the entire history starting from ancient times and the first organization of life on this territory to the Macedonian independence and the most contemporary developments. This makes the monograph a very important contribution to the state of art since it is one of the rare academic works in English which analyzes and discusses the historical developments on the territory of Macedonia.

The book covers a time period of 25 centuries of political organization on the territory of Macedonia. Palaret begins with the rise and growth of the Macedonian kingdom in ancient times until the Ottoman invasions, which are described in the first volume of the book. The second volume analyses the entire period under the Ottoman rule until the independence and the most recent developments. Despite the longitudinal structure and analysis of the historical developments, Palaret manages to emphasize the relevance of several important topics such as religion, nationalism and multi-ethnic relations. The book offers an overview of the growth and the role of Christianity, but also Islam on the territory of Macedonia. The focus on this topic is crucial since it reflects the cultural developments in a broader context, but it is particularly important to understand the contemporary multicultural and multiethnic division of Macedonia.

The second volume covers the widely discussed topics of nation building, nationalism and identity. The history of Macedonia, even nowadays, is a matter of political contention. Historical events are differently interpreted and used in

**Author's correspondence e-mail:** [trajche.panov@eui.eu](mailto:trajche.panov@eui.eu)

## Book review

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creating national myths about the Balkan nations. In this sense, to analyze the history of Macedonia inevitably means to go deeper into the contested and predominantly political discussions about national identities. Palairet is not afraid of going through these important debates, thus making the book a valuable academic guide to the broader historical and political developments on the Balkans.

The contemporary aspects of nation formation as part of the Yugoslav federation and since gaining independence are covered in chapters 21 and 22 and to a certain extent also in chapter 19 which discusses the second world war and the civil war in Greece. This exceptionally relevant part of the Macedonian history is covered in rather limited space, though it includes several important aspects such as nation building, the communist regime, multiethnic relations, independence and the Macedonian-Greek dispute about the constitutional name of the country. Particularly the issue of multi-ethnic relations is not sufficiently discussed. Palairet's strong analytical skills enable him to identify these issues, but there is a lack of an in-depth analysis and discussion of these relevant aspects.

The book, indeed, is a voyage through history, offering a very important overview of the political, economic and social developments on this territory. For such a complex task, Palairet still provides the readers with a detailed and rich amount of historical data followed by provocative discussions and historical interpretations. Mapping the entire history of Macedonia is exactly one of the main strengths of the book, but also possibly one of its biggest limitations because of the lack of depth.

Two elements should be taken into account in order to evaluate the academic importance of such a book on Macedonian history. The first is of conceptual character. More concretely, of the question what one understands by Macedonia: The current territory of the independent Macedonia, or what Macedonian historians define as "the historical borders" of Macedonia? Palairet's approach is closer to the latter. He defines Macedonia based on a map of the Ottoman territory in the early 1900s which includes the territory of the independent Macedonia, the northern part of Greece or Aegean Macedonia, the western part of Bulgaria or Pirin Macedonia as well as small parts that remained in Serbia. This decision is very important because it reinforces the debate about national identity and the historical origin of the nation. It also follows the interpretation of the borders of Macedonia accepted by the Macedonian historians, (as well as competing Bulgarian historians who only question the origins of the Macedonian nation), contrary to the Greek and

Serbian historical interpretations. In this sense, Palairet's approach is not novel in the analysis and interpretation of the history of Macedonia and it does not contribute to solving, but it follows and/or even reinforces the debate between different national perspectives on contested political discourses.

The second important element is the analytical aspect. The very ambitious plan to review the entire history of Macedonia causes certain relevant research limitations. The analysis lacks depth and more detailed discussion and interpretation of the historical processes. Palairet does not hesitate to take strong stances and make bold claims about historical processes and the role of domestic or international actors, but in numerous cases these strong claims lack a deeper analysis or a stronger empirical support. This is particularly visible in the chapters that deal with the most contemporary developments in Macedonia. While Palairet's capacities to summarize a very eventful period in a limited space and to capture the most relevant historical events are the book's greatest asset, his explanations need stronger empirical support and deeper analysis. The way they are presented leaves great room for criticism.

In general, the history of Macedonia is never only an academic, but also political topic. Palairet does maybe not succeed in offering a new set of interpretations of the historical processes or uncovering new historical facts that will refute or reinforce certain existing academic paradigms (goals he might not even have set for this book). But with his intellectual courage, analytical boldness and encyclopedic knowledge, he manages to disturb and dissatisfy all competing nationalistic paradigms on the Balkans to a certain extent. No single side can be fully satisfied with Palairet's interpretation and, taking into account the Balkan context and the coexisting nationalist narratives, perhaps this is an important asset of the book. The book "Macedonia – a voyage through history" is an important summary of the history of Macedonia. Palairet's ambitious plan, supported with clear academic courage and passion, makes this book an interesting introduction to the Macedonian history. It has a significant contribution to the literature on Macedonia and its rather provocative and bold academic style opens a room for increasing interests in the topic and for the pursuit of further research in this area.