

Book Review

ANATOMY OF POST-COMMUNIST EUROPEAN DEFENSE INSTITUTIONS: THE MIRAGE OF MILITARY MODERNITY

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In *Anatomy of post-communist European defense institutions: The mirage of military modernity*, Thomas-Durell Young's aim was to determine why Central and Eastern European (CEE) states have failed to apply democratic defence governance concepts, despite 25 years of Western assistance programmes. Young provides an in-depth comparative analysis of the impact of Western defence reform programmes on CEE states, from the end of the Cold War to circa 2015, which is of great theoretical importance for South African defence planners. The United States (US) and other members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) have been extensively involved in providing education, training and technical assistance as part of defence reform programmes for CEE states.¹ In this book, CEE states cover certain former Soviet Union states (such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and the Baltic States), former Warsaw Pact countries (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia) as well as former Yugoslav republics.² However, it excludes Albania, Belarus, Kosovo and Russia.³ The 'three typologies' in this book thus refer to former Soviet Union, Warsaw Pact and Yugoslavian countries.

Young points out that, despite all the exposure to Western planning methods, training and education, as well as participation in NATO exercises and operations, CEE states in general have not been able to establish the ability to do proper defence planning, mainly due to the continued impact of legacy communist-inspired concepts.⁴ To achieve the aim, Young covers five key aspects as underlying questions within each typology.⁵ Firstly, an overview is provided of the thinking and institutional capabilities of defence institutions in CEE states, by comparing these to democratic Western

defence concepts and practices. Secondly, the obstacles that inhibited defence reforms are identified. Thirdly, Western policy and methods during assistance programmes are critically evaluated. Fourthly, the influence of these programmes towards instilling democratic defence governance concepts in CEE states is assessed. Lastly, Young wants to determine what both Western and CEE states have to do differently in order to achieve more effective defence reform in CEE states – at a faster pace.

To shed light on the unaffordability of and strategic imbalance in CEE defence organisations, Young explains that, within the communist model, the military enjoys special benefits not offered to the rest of society.⁶ The embedded heavy reliance on mass regarding troops, equipment and logistics for operational success in CEE states, inhibits awareness about costing in general and using resources sparingly and cost-effectively.⁷ With this systematic focus on mass and quantity, the life and value of the individual soldier (especially under communism) are expendable, whereas in democracies, the individual citizen soldier forms part of democratic society, which enjoys fundamental freedoms and rights, including the right to vote, debate military affairs and ask questions about military spending. The absence of critical thinking and debate in communist militaries stifles renewal and innovation.⁸ Young argues that, since CEE states still apply communist legacy concepts, including rigid centralised command, their defence policy documents have little effect on implementation, defence outcomes and spending.⁹ They lack operational focus, cannot stay within their limited defence budgets and overspend on cumbersome personnel structures. This leaves them with too little operating funds for field exercises and maintaining prime mission equipment (e.g. fighter aircraft). Subsequently many CEE states have “hollow” units, low operational readiness, aircraft that cannot fly, pilots with insufficient flying hours, and capital projects that are unnecessarily delayed.¹⁰ Most CEE states are still stuck with Cold War-era equipment as a financial, logistic and doctrinal yoke.¹¹ While countries like Poland, Romania and Slovenia have not been in constant decline regarding defence capabilities and capacity, all CEE states have capability gaps and serious defence planning shortcomings that have severely affected their ability to lead and manage defence organisations optimally.¹²

Young warns that the incoherent and weak policies, strategies and capabilities of CEE countries present significant risks to NATO’s deterrence and readiness within the context of increasing Russian assertiveness, as displayed in the Crimea, Eastern Ukraine, Syria and other regions.¹³ Moreover, Young argues that the tendency of CEE states to hold onto static and localised Cold War-era territorial (conventional) defence capabilities and infrastructure, reduces their ability to be functional, integrated NATO allies in collective defence, which depends on rapid reaction and manoeuvre.¹⁴ These shortcomings in CEE military capabilities¹⁵ have created dependence on Western support and resources for deployability,¹⁶ and have become an unfunded liability for NATO on its most vulnerable side.¹⁷

Although Young writes mainly from an American perspective, this book is critical of the discreet and overenthusiastic Western approaches and expensive initiatives to assist CEE countries, without understanding the multiplicity and magnitude of challenges that these defence organisations have experienced following democratisation.¹⁸ Young

emphasises that the problem of a lack of reform can be understood only if the conceptual frameworks, political context, organisational culture and disincentives for change are understood and addressed.¹⁹ This presumes an internal realisation and steadfast political will within CEE states that they must change their old paradigms.

Young's recommendations for more appropriate advice and assistance programmes are relevant to other countries that underwent democratic regime change. Firstly, he emphasises that all role players and stakeholders at national level with strategic partners have to delineate the unique realities and conceptual challenges they face honestly, and should direct defence reform as a political intervention throughout the entire hierarchy of defence organisations, and not just through easy military-to-military programmes. This requires fine diplomatic footwork and hands-on leadership between unequal defence partners to solve major tensions and turf wars to protect vested interests.²⁰ Secondly, the inappropriateness of US defence planning models and tools for CEE states is ~~was~~ strongly criticised, and Young argues that each country should rather develop simple, tailored defence planning methods and tools, according to their unique needs. Thirdly, civil–military relations in CEE states had to be rebalanced following democratic regime change. To help address this, Young emphasises capacity building for defence ministries and civilian defence officials as a critical success factor for democratic institutional reform and enhanced defence policy and planning expertise.²¹ Fourthly, militaries in CEE states tend to develop unrealistic long-term visions and strategies, with pipedream force designs that are not costed and which cannot be afforded. Young recommends that, in the short and medium term, CEE militaries should rather build cohesive, operational units that can perform all their combat and support functions in the field during live exercises and operations. Lastly, he argues that defence budgets should be divided in thirds in terms of spending on personnel, capital projects and operating costs, as opposed to the ratio of 40:30:30 that is often prescribed.

There are a few points of critique ~~criticism~~. Firstly, while Western norms and defence concepts serve an important theoretical purpose to illustrate the shortcomings of CEE militaries, this book creates the impression that Western militaries do not at times struggle with similar problems as former communist militaries, albeit on a smaller scale and in a less fundamental way. For example, after the Vietnam War (1965–1973), the United States had a major civil–military gap and a ‘hollow’ military that had to be professionalised. History has shown that even Western countries sometimes have to revisit what has made militaries effective and efficient in the past, especially by studying ~~from~~ so-called ‘paradigm armies’.²² Militaries can respond to change (or the need thereof) in several ways, varying from rebuilding deteriorated institutions to imitating and importing new ideas, introducing or adapting new ideas through innovation, or stagnation (stasis).²³ Secondly, Young does not unpack the dilemmas and indecision of CEE states on whether they should focus on self-reliant territorial defence for national defence, or on NATO's expeditionary capabilities. In other words, Young assumes that NATO's approach is best for CEE states, but he does not substantiate it. Thirdly, the argument that Soviet-designed legacy military equipment forms part of the problem that CEE states cannot rid themselves of communist legacy concepts, is not fully explained. There are doctrinal and technical reasons that could have been explored in addition to the

conceptual and logistic arguments. This criticism is minor considering the thoroughness of the research and synthesis in this publication.

The empirical depth and comparative theoretical value of the book are quite extensive, since the book is not only based on Young's detailed multi-level research on the policies and strategies of CEE states, but also on his personal involvement in examining the influence of the above-mentioned typologies, as well as experience in trying to assist CEE governments with defence reforms.²⁴ The overall conclusion of this book is that formerly undemocratic, highly centralised, communist-inspired and doctrinally inflexible defence organisations will face a long and difficult road towards implementing Western democratic defence reforms, which cannot succeed without politicians who vigorously steer and enforce defence organisations to change. This book is recommended for defence legislators, civilian officials within the defence and security community, defence planners, joint and service college staff and students, senior officers, and postgraduate students within the field of strategic studies. The above-mentioned defence challenges that CEE states face should ring a familiar bell to the South African defence community, which should also attentively read this book.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ T Young. *Anatomy of post-communist European defense institutions: The mirage of military modernity*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, xi, 3.
- ² *Ibid.*, pp. xii–xiii, 65, 90.
- ³ *Ibid.*, pp. xii–xiii.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 53–54.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 5.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 64, 70.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 184–186.
- ²² C Tuck. “Future land warfare”. In Jordan, D, Kiras, J, Lonsdale, D, Speller, I, Tuck, C and Walton, C (eds), *Understanding modern warfare*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 128–155, 142. [List all editors]
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ Young *op. cit.*, p. xi.