

The Balkans *A Study of a Discourse*

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ABSTRACT: For more than a decade the Balkans were a bloody arena of monstrosities, the memory of which has still not subsided. Many heated discussions have been devoted to understanding the underlying logic and causes of the Balkan conflicts. Those futile “attempts,” however, have given rise to “balkanization”—a discourse that capitalized on the “Balkan essence” and diagnosed that the region is caught up in a vortex of ancient hatreds. Presenting a frozen image of the Balkans, such a discourse gradually gained autonomy that allows no dynamism and has the potential to turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

With this paper I will examine four theories explaining the emergence of the Balkan discourse. By utilizing a post-modernist approach to look into the specifics of Balkanism, I will investigate the signifier “Balkan” which has come to designate the geographical region as a cultural entity and inspect if such usage is justified. Providing a historical study, I will compare nationalisms in the Balkans with nationalisms elsewhere in Europe and investigate what, if anything makes Balkan nationalism qualitatively different.

The unusual cruelties of the Balkan wars in the beginning and the end of the twentieth century came as a violent shock to the rest of Europe. The motivations of the Balkan actors never became clear to Western scholars. To the West, the causes of those wars seemed irrational. They were seen as the wild outrage of underdeveloped and bloodthirsty nations.¹ “When the wars...first began, the US responded as if leaders in the Balkans were irrationally motivated by primordial hatred,” Julie Mertus—a specialist on the region—argues.² Each conflict resulted in further fragmentations that

reiterated further the “Balkan” image of chaos, backwardness, and nationalistic zeal. The Balkan wars have come to occupy public attention to such an extent that “Balkan” has become a dirty word, a synonym of anarchy that many scholars refer to in a markedly derogatory tone.

Interestingly, the events that befell Yugoslavia in the 90’s are usually referred to as the wars in ex-Yugoslavia or the war in Bosnia and Kosovo respectively. It is predominantly in US and Western European literature that they are referred to as the Balkan wars.³ In fact, Yugoslavia was not labeled “Balkan” country prior to the Bosnian war. Rather, “[it] was the shining star of Eastern Europe” and the West, least of all, wanted to recog-

¹ See *Report of the International Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan Wars*. Washington D.C. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1914, 1993.

² Julie Mertus. “Serbia: Remaining Europe’s Outlaw Nation.” *Journal of International Affairs*. Spring 2001, Vol. 54 Issue 2, p 489.

³ Maria Todorova. *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford University Press. New York Oxford, 1997, p 186.

nize its Balkan belonging. All this serves to show that “Balkan” was a made-up, instrumental attribute that was for the West to allocate.

Along those lines, it is interesting to examine who has been awarded the status “Balkan.” While some attempt to dissociate themselves from this “disgraceful” group, the Western list of “Balkan” states includes Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, and the republics of former Yugoslavia with the possible exception of Slovenia. The positions of Turkey and Greece in this discourse are more intricate. While both countries are overtly excluded from the Balkan group, there are certain aspects in which European reactions to the Balkans and Turkey can be paralleled.

The Balkans are often looked down upon as primitive and underdeveloped. Balkanization as a term has come to symbolize chaos, disorder, barbarity, tribalism, and the disintegration of states. In a book that was designed to throw light on the complexities of the Balkans, Robert Kaplan went so far as to claim that the peoples in the region are stuck in a vortex of atavistic instincts and tribal sentiments. Despite the attempts of the enlightened West to intervene, the Balkans are highly susceptible to ethnic wars and appalling massacres, further argued Kaplan—“[h]ere [in the Balkans] men have been isolated by poverty and ethnic rivalry, dooming them to hate.” The same line of thought runs in George Kennan’s report on the Balkans that aroused much of Maria Todorova’s invective in *Imagining the Balkans*.⁴ Thus, despite his authentic

encounters with the Balkans, Kaplan, like many, did exactly the opposite of what he was aiming with his book — a simplified image of the region. Kaplan and Kennan are by no means alone in their views. The emergence of the Balkan discourse, a phenomena much more alarming than the diminutive usage of the word, was thus facilitated by analogous attitude in scholarships on ethnic studies.

There exist two main approaches in ethnic conflict scholarship. The primordialist school rationalizes nationalism as an inborn need that is an essential part of human identity. It describes ethnicity as “inherited and inescapable.”⁵ Constructivists, on the other hand, put greater emphasis on the economic, political, ideological, and international dimensions of conflict. Put in another way, constructivism “relies on the existence of fluid and somehow instrumental identities that allow opt-out.”⁶

The discourse on ethnic conflicts has undergone many changes that have marked a significant conversion from primordialism to constructivism. While constructivism is now the mainstream in scholarship, primordialism has become a matter of political incorrectness. Likewise, the discourses on Northern Ireland and the Basques marked a transition from primordial-

For Todorova’s reactions, see *Imagining the Balkans*, p.5

⁵ Robert Hislope. “Between a Bad peace and a Good War: Insights and Lessons From the Almost-War in Macedonia.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. Jan. 2003, Vol. 26, Issue 1. p.4

⁶ Robert Hislope. “Between a Bad peace and a Good War: Insights and Lessons From the Almost-War in Macedonia.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. Jan. 2003, Vol. 26, Issue 1. p. 4.

⁴ Kennan wrote an introduction to the 1993’s edition of the Carnegie Report on the Balkans.

ism to constructivism.⁷ The same, however, does not count for the Balkans. Even though as an approach it has lost grounds, primordialism is still focused on the Balkan area.⁸ This is even more paradoxical considering the claim authors such as Misha Glenny make of Balkan identities. The ferocious passion of Balkan pride, argues Glenny, is not the result of hardened and inescapable identities; rather, it is a reaction to their excessive fluctuations with the emergence and breakup of states.⁹ This introduces some of the paradoxical aspects of the Balkan discourse.

All in all, dichotomies such as primordialism-instrumentalism are useless and both approaches fall short of explaining the complexities of ethnic conflicts. Distinct political scientists attempt to “frame ethnic identities as amalgamations of both perennial and modern values, ideas, and dispositions?”¹⁰ So far, however, this has done little to correct the prejudice that exists against the Balkans.

The above-mentioned bias is evident not only in the literature devoted to ethnic conflicts, but also in a broader range of academic writing. While castigating the “brutal” Balkans, Western academia has been pliable enough to provide euphemisms even for the most

terrible events in European history such as the genocide during WWII. It is interesting to examine some of the theories that have been put forward to provide rationale for the Holocaust, thereby to ensure Germany’s peaceful transition from the post-WWII period. Hannah Arendt brought about the idea of “the banality of evil.” The cause of Nazism, she argued, lay in the willing obedience and abstention from critical thinking. Most famous for her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she established that Hitler’s executioners, rather than being sadists, were overcome by a widespread, therefore banal, tendency to renounce their personal judgment.¹¹ Stanley Milgram summarized the Holocaust as an “obedience experiment” in 1974 under the title *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*.¹² However, the “banality of evil” and the “obedience experiment” were never evoked in discussions of the Balkans.

There are diverging opinions as to whether particular Nazi practices were a consequence of German irrationality or, rather, a consequence of their very modernity and rationalism. If one explores the German self-image of being a *Kulturnation*, granted special rights and obligations, scholars argued, it no longer seems so surprising that cultured and educated people can fall prey to demagoguery. Because of, and not despite, citizen dissociation and

⁷ This argument was also raised by scholars such as Juan Linz, and Edward A. Tiryakian.

⁸ For more information see Simic in “Nationalism as a Folk Ideology,” Gil-White in “How Thick is Blood,” *Report of the International Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan Wars*.

⁹ Misha Glenny. *The Balkans : Nationalism, War, and the Great Powers, 1804-1999*. New York : Viking, 2000., p 158.

¹⁰ Robert Hislope. “Between a Bad peace and a Good War: Insights and Lessons From the Almost-War in Macedonia.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. Jan. 2003, Vol. 26, Issue 1. p 7.

¹¹ See Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition*. Chicago University Press, 1958.

¹² Milgram examined the clash between obedience to authority and personal ethics. During the Nuremberg War Criminal trials Milgram focused on the self-justifying statements made by individuals indicted for acts of genocide. Stanley Milgram. *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.

modernization, Germans were able to reach those heights of violence. The evocation of primordial past to meet Nazi “pseudo-scientific” ends has been interpreted as a testimony of modernism. It would be, therefore, incorrect, theorists argue, to ascribe Nazism to endemic German barbarism or to “marked enthusiasm” on the side of ordinary Germans. Germans committed barbarous crimes but that did not render them barbarous people. The Holocaust was not considered incompatible with their sophistication and acculturation. Such rationale was evoked to defend the ordinary German from being castigated as a barbarian, but no similar theories have been even thought of in the Balkan case.

Even though the Holocaust has been referred to as a “Revolt against Civilization,” there appeared scholarship that sought to explain it. Even authors that accused the German people *en masse*, as Daniel Goldhagen in *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, pointed that “prejudice is a manifestation of people's (individual and collective) search for meaning.”¹³ Michael Burleigh pointed to the Ontological crisis as the cause for Nazism.¹⁴ No such search for meaning or ontological crisis could be granted to the Balkans. Such theories could not be applied to the Balkan conflicts. Rather, they were easily categorized as resulting from bestial and tribal animalistic instincts. True, the Balkan conflicts were oftentimes vicious, but why the double standard after all?

¹³ Daniel Goldhagen. *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997. p.39.

¹⁴ See Michael Burleigh. *The Third Reich*. UK: Pan Books, 2001.

The Balkans societies, Western scholars claim, are still patriarchic, mainly rural, with a marked affinity to violence and guns.¹⁵ Are the Balkans really this uniform and barbarous mass that they are often depicted as? Many have engaged in defining the distinct Balkan essence, relying on the assumption that there is such thing as an essence, be it Slavic, Anglo-Saxon, or Mediterranean. While there exist certain mental and attitudinal structures typical of the Balkans, the list of supposedly obvious similarities can be easily paralleled by a list of dissimilarities. “It is true that “60% of Albanian men between ages 18-24 declared that violence was an acceptable instrument for political aims” and that certain Albanian tribes have a cult for guns and engage in bloody feuds.¹⁶ However, the inclination to violence should be seen as a human, rather than Albanian, Bulgarian, Serbian, or whatever feature. Placing every Balkan nation under a common denominator means to disregard centuries of civilizational achievements in the Balkans. In fact, “the comparing figure [of the above-mentioned survey] for Macedonian young men was 16%.”¹⁷ “The interaction of differences and similarities neither begins nor ends at the borders of the area so-called ‘the Balkans,’” concludes Bulgarian scholar Alexander Kiossev by arguing

¹⁵ For more information see Gerhard Gossman. “Der Parastaera Balkaner.” *Slavische Rundschau*, 1933, p. 1-16

¹⁶ Rober Hislope. “Between a Bad peace and a Good War: Insights and Lessons From the Almost-War in Macedonia.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Jan. 2003, Vol. 26, Issue 1. p. 22.

¹⁷ Robert Hislope. “Between a Bad peace and a Good War: Insights and Lessons From the Almost-War in Macedonia.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Jan. 2003, Vol. 26, Issue 1. p. 22.

that, likewise, one can engage in cross-comparative studies to examine the similarities between Albanians and Italians or Thracian culture and Anatolian.¹⁸

The complexities of the Balkan people have been often diminished. Robert Kaplan sought to explain Serbian identity only through their historical animosity for Muslim Albanians.¹⁹ Perhaps he thought this is as much as there is to know of Serbs. The same scholar went at great lengths in his judgments for Bulgaria. However, Kaplan's encounter with the country was based solely on single experiences with a Bulgarian acquaintance. This must have been a solid base for profound examination. All in all, the diverse historical and cultural lives of a number of human groups in the Balkans have ended up being substituted by a simplified identity that is seen as their essence by the West. "The countries may be different but [their] civilization is one and the same."²⁰ This rhetoric raises the overwhelming question: To what then should this tendency for essentialism be attributed? Why the Balkans, after all?

There are several ways to explain the emergence of the Balkan discourse. Borrowing extensively from the field of psychology, two such theories have emerged, based, respectively, on the ego-discourse and on the idea of the

significant "Other." There are still other possible conjectures that point to the pervasiveness of media and the political frustration of the West in the context of its incapacity to intervene effectively.

In a book designed as a fierce rejection of the derogatory usage of the term Balkans, Maria Todorova adopts the idea of the ego discourse. While she often alludes to Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Todorova makes it clear that Balkanism is more than just Orientalism applied to the Balkans. "Unlike Orientalism which is a discourse about an imputed opposition, Balkanism is a discourse of the imputed ambiguity."²¹ It is the Balkans' in-between-ness and their "transitory character" that makes them the incomplete self rather than the incomplete other. The Balkans, thus, are the incomplete self, the failing Europe, the alter ego. Given the West's expectations, this point gains even more ground in the context of the Balkans' political and social failures. The Balkan countries did not manage their nation-building successfully. They never succeeded implementing the concept of the melting pot—a value held high by the Western scholars. The overall attitude of the West is one of a benign indifference that is usually compensated by the encouragement of a pet country. Such a pet country was Yugoslavia. It is, therefore, ironic, that Serbia—Yugoslavia's legitimate heir—should carry the brunt of the post-war burden. In fact, both Croatia and Greece can rival and even surpass Serbia's violent nationalism. It is precisely because of the high expectations

¹⁸ Alexander Kiossev. "The Dark Intimacy: Maps, Identities, Acts of Identifications," accessed at <http://www.eurozine.com/article/2003-05-19-kiossev-en.html>

¹⁹ Robert Kaplan. *Balkan ghosts: a Journey Through History*. New York: Vintage books. 1994, Intro. Xiv.

²⁰ Robert Kaplan. *Balkan ghosts: a Journey Through History*. New York: Vintage books. 1994, p. 283.

²¹ Maria Todorova. *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford University Press. New York Oxford, 1997, 17

that have been laid on Serbia that it was easily transformed into Europe's "outlaw nation." The same is valid for the Balkans overall.

The Balkans, Todorova argues, have ended up carrying the West's political frustrations.²² This argument is further supported by Larry Wolf—a political scientist on the Balkans—who claims that "the symbolic geography of Europe [during the Enlightenment] was reshaped and the backwardness and "barbarism" of the North was projected over the South-East."²³ Attempting to trace how much of what is labeled Balkan corresponds to reality and how much has been invented, Todorova argues the origins of Balkanism as a discourse are to be found in European inventive "discovery" of the Balkans.²⁴

In fact, any "discovery" is more or less doomed to be inventive. By elaborating on the basics of the human mind and perception, post-modern philosophy offers a key on this phenomenon. Michel Foucault presents brilliant analyses of psychiatric, political, and carceral modes of subjection in the context of which the mechanisms of power and domination can be better understood.²⁵ As a post-modernist, Foucault examines a myriad of elusive

modes of repression and subjection. Foucault has thoroughly examined the power-knowledge relationship between subject and object that ensues from such "evaluations." The position of an "evaluator," Foucault demonstrates, creates an immediate psychological superiority over the subject of examination. Along those lines, knowledge or the claim to know and evaluate is the most sophisticated key for domination. Where does this ardor for judgment come from? The answer, to put it in Foucault's terms, is the need to assess oneself as opposed to the "Other." Such antagonisms maximize one's virtues. The "Other," therefore, even if not existent, needs to be constructed, which introduces the second theory for the emergence of the Balkan discourse. Even though Todorova often makes allusions to the above-mentioned post-modernist phenomena, the idea of the significant "Other" presents a perspective that is somehow different from her theory of the incomplete self.

For Europe, the Balkans were the "Other" against which it could juxtapose and maximize its achievements. The belief that the Occident—the West—has the authority to assess and examine the Balkans created an immediate superiority over the object of analysis—the Balkans. An elusive sense of domination was thus established when Western Europe started exploring the Balkans. Traveler accounts became the first source based on which the Balkans became the "Other" for the West. Since a text has a life of its own once out of the author's hand, accuracy is not even the main concern when considering the impact of travelers' accounts on the emergence of the Balkan discourse.

²² Maria Todorova. *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford University Press. New York Oxford, 1997, 1997, 181.

²³ Alexander Kiossev. "The Dark Intimacy: Maps, Identities, Acts of Identifications." p. 12, accessed at <http://www.eurozine.com/article/2003-05-19-kiossev-en.html>

²⁴ Maria Todorova. *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford University Press. New York Oxford, 1997, 1997

²⁵ See Michel Foucault. *Madness and Civilization: A history of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard. London: Tavistock, 1967.

Roland Barthes first established that an author's intentions in creating a text are irrelevant in the ensuing interpretations of the text since human perceptions of things and events are formed far in advance of the authentic act of perception.²⁶ Likewise, travelers often had their "Balkan" perceptions far in advance to their authentic encounters. For them even the prosaic was often a fertile ground that easily became exotic and came to satisfy their expectations for the extraordinary. The next logical step was the creation of category in which to frame the newly-acquired "knowledge." Categorization in itself is always a futile attempt. People often treat identities as if they are concrete and stable concepts when, in fact, they are rather fluid and fluctuate through the years so much so that "no man presently knows what is a Greco-Roman, a Celt, a Teuton or a Slav."²⁷ Moreover, linguistic similarities are by no means a solid base on which to establish a blood relationship between any two groups. "The movements of peoples, the origins of races, the transitions from type to type or the persistence of type"—all these are mysterious factors that remain unaccounted for.²⁸ It is futile endeavor, therefore, to attempt to establish a temporal and spatial relation between peoples separated through the ages. This is even more so in the Balkan case when attempting to establish a pattern that can be generalized and that encompasses all Balkan

people through all the years. Such attempt is further aggravated by the peculiar Balkan geography that was conducive to the formation of sub-national groupings and micro-cultures that allow no simplification.²⁹ The categorization of the Balkans, however, is a fact.

A purely energy-saving mechanism that brings order into our minds, the "us vs. them" categorization holds true for the attitudes of Europe for the Balkans just as much as it is valid for the attitudes the Balkans have for Europe. In fact, it holds true of any human being. The trouble is when categorizations in books such as *Balkan Ghosts* motivate political action as it occurred during the Bosnia crisis.³⁰ Another problem is when such constructions start a life of their own as a discourse—Balkanism—and present a stagnant picture of the Balkan peoples—"[t]he whole peninsula has entered a cataclysmic period that will last for many years."³¹ It is obvious categories and constructions cannot be done away with. The question, however, is how and the extent to which we can consciously wrestle with them. Can we minimize the impacts of the Balkan discourse?

A third perspective on the emergence of the Balkan discourse relates to mass culture. An interesting subject to consider beforehand, however, is the frequency of ethnic warfare. Research

²⁶ See Roland Barthes. *The Death of the Author*. trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill, 1977.

²⁷ W. M. Sloane. "Turkey in Europe." *Political Science Quarterly*. Vol. 23, No. 2. (Jun., 1908), p. 307

²⁸ W. M. Sloane. "Turkey in Europe." *Political Science Quarterly*. Vol. 23, No. 2. (Jun., 1908), p. 307

²⁹ Tom Gallagher. "A Balkan History Learning Curve." in *European History Quarterly*. Vol 31, page 142.

³⁰ President Clinton's decision to intervene is said to have been influenced by Kaplan's book. This fact is mentioned in the introduction of *Balkan Ghosts*.

³¹ Robert Kaplan. *Balkan ghosts: a Journey Through History*. New York: Vintage books. 1994, p. 287.

conducted by Ted Gurr published in *Foreign Affairs* asserts that ethnic conflict in the twentieth century is on the wane.³² To what then shall we attribute the public anxiety, if not obsession, in the West with the Balkans during the last decade? One key is the growing popularity of media—a major opinion builder.

Media has become a key political player with the potential to distort priorities and concepts. Often responsible for the formation of a specific context that places limits and guidelines for the political responses of other institutions, media has demonstrated its power when it turned public attitudes regarding the war in Vietnam. After 5 years of relative support, people demanded immediate retreat. The emotionally intense broadcast of the deaths of 18 U.S. soldiers caused the withdrawal from Rwanda in 1994. TV broadcasting of revolutions around Europe produced a domino effect that helped topple communist regimes in a number of countries such as Romania and East Germany. Politicians have every right to be wary of such a loss of control that has often led to unpredictable results. People and politics have become vulnerable to a newly-modified style of journalism that relies on sensations, immediacy, and pervasiveness, often at the expense of analysis.³³ The new rules of journalism have imposed a constant demand for scandalous “headlines.” Thus, media, in a way, demanded the emergence of the Balkan discourse. It was

part of the necessity for the shocking and the sensational.

The end of the cold war caused a shift in public attention; the nuclear threat was no longer a major concern. The new priority list of concerns in the West brought the Balkans to the spotlight. Media is now forming the political priorities. It has managed to connect with human emotions and touch upon men’s most deep-felt sentiments and values, reaching “not only people’s homes, but also their minds, shaping their thoughts and sometimes their behavior.”³⁴ Even though the Bosnian war made the top ten list of the decade’s most deadly conflicts it was less lethal than any of the African conflicts.³⁵ Nevertheless, the above-mentioned pervasiveness of mass media helped perpetuate a lurid image of the region—one of underdeveloped peoples whose animalistic drives cannot be restrained. Clearly, “image provoked bursts of public compassion or anger” have started dictating politics, argues James Hoze, a scientist devoted on the influence of media.³⁶ The same goes on to explain that if pervasiveness of media is the illness, reason and political dialogue is the cure. If media propagates a frozen discourse of the Balkans, it is vital that such an alarming pattern be tackled.

These three theories on the emergence of Balkanism, however, do not exhaust all the possibilities. Another explanation to the emergence of the Balkan discourse is Western incapacity to successfully intervene in the region and/or unwillingness to bear the costs

³² Ted Gurr. “Ethnic Conflict on the Wane.” *Foreign Affairs*. May/Jun2000, Vol. 79 Issue 3, p52.

³³ James Hoze Jr. *Foreign Affairs*. The pervasiveness of media.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ivo H. Daalder. “Unlearning the Lessons of Kosovo.” in *Foreign Policy*, Fall 116, p 128.

³⁶ James Hoze Jr., “The Pervasiveness of Media.” in *Foreign Affairs* 2001.

of intervention. Thus, the claim that the Balkans are irrational and primitive can be as well taken for a self-serving justification in the context of the West's frustration for its political failures in the Balkans. However, this argument loses ground considering the usual political practices of great powers on the Balkans. It is contestable whether their intervention was genuinely humanitarian act that could have caused any frustration. In fact, historically, the only straightforward calls for involvement came during the late nineteenth century from distinct intellectuals such as William Gladstone, Victor Hugo, Charles Darwin, Oscar Wilde, and Giuseppe Garibaldi. Overall, however, the interventions of the Great Powers in the region were dictated only by their personal gains so much so that when they were "faced with a situation in which no Western power had a direct interest, governments, nongovernmental organizations, and multilateral institutions turned to the desiccated vocabulary of conflict resolution in order to stake out noncommittal positions."³⁷ In fact, the first time the Western powers intervened with no perceived economic or strategic interest, but for humanitarian reasons, was the Bosnian conflict.³⁸ Along those lines, the "conviction" that the conflict was an example of "atavistic behavior [that] could not be changed through reason...an entirely "natural" course of historic animosities" was definitely a

comfortable excuse for the historical inaction and indifference on behalf of the West.³⁹

The tribalism and underdevelopment of the Balkans justified the application of an unusual criterion when judging their policies. While the public attention is constantly focused on the "unheard-of" atrocities in the Balkans, a quiet carnage is taking place in other places of "civilized" Europe such as Northern Ireland and the Basque region in Spain. Curiously, those spots do not make it so often to the headlines and if they do, they are referred to as "independence fights" with the means of terror. The "irrational" Balkan wars, however, are simply the result of inherent animalistic drives. True, the Balkan conflicts were brutal. In this context, however, an interesting subject to consider is the means through which homogeneity in Western societies was reached. The nation building process of Western nations has been no less brutal, only it has taken place at a different time. Events like the night of Bartholomew clearly demonstrate that point and might prove useful reminders of history. While it is true that every attempt to reach Great Bulgaria, Serbia, or Greece has had tragic consequences, this is equally true of the British attempts to establish Pax Britannica not so long ago. Only those tragedies, unlike the ones in the Balkans, were often at the expense of someone else, mainly the colonies. Clearly, nationalism and imperialist ambitions are not exclusive attributes; Western Europe and the Balkans have been equally fertile grounds for their rise.

³⁷ Carl Cavanagh Hodge. "Woodrow Wilson in Our Time: NATO's Goals in Kosovo." in *Parameters: US Army War College*, Spring, 2001, Vol. 31. Issue 1, p 125.

³⁸ Misha Glenny. *The Balkans: nationalism, war, and the Great Powers, 1804-1999*. New York : Viking, 2000, p. 638-639.

³⁹ Misha Glenny. *The Balkans: nationalism, war, and the Great Powers, 1804-1999*. New York : Viking, 2000, p. 489.

The key for understanding nationalisms in the Balkans, and elsewhere, is the inherent universal human need to stereotype—a mechanism that brings order and logic to reality. Self-images identity, by all means, have an enormous appeal to people and that does not apply to the Balkan peoples exclusively. If figures are to be trusted, it becomes obvious that it is in contemporary Europe as a whole that nationalism is on the rise. “In the most members states of the EU a hard core ranging from 12 to 18 percent of the electorate harbors resentful, xenophobic sentiments, particularly against immigrants.”⁴⁰ Such sentiments are more easily discernible in the rise to power of politicians like Paul Fortrein, Jorg Heider, Jacques LePin and others. However, it is not only the Netherlands, Austria, and France that fall under this pattern. Rather, a thorough scrutiny in the European picture is required. Clearly, “illiberal democracy [has become] fashionable as never before.”⁴¹ Populist demagogues, many of them elected, cultivate ethnic resentment and ride it to power.⁴² Again, this might be comfortably labeled as different type of nationalism and packed into another category that would better serve the interests of the West. It would have been convenient if right-wing European movements, too, could be traced in a Kaplan-ian fashion in the Balkans.

The Balkans are “...at world’s end, at a place whose very collapse gave the twentieth century its horrific direction,” argues Kaplan.⁴³ His rhetoric has gone so far as to trace the causes of the Holocaust in the Balkans. If scholars such as Kaplan ascribe the WWI and WWII to the Balkans, it is clear they cannot distinguish between the real cause of a conflict and the event that merely triggers it. There were numerous trigger points that could have substituted Sarajevo. In fact, WWI was on the verge of eruption in 1912 as Russia and Austria struggled over the distribution of Albanian speaking lands.⁴⁴ True, Franz Ferdinand’s assassination in Belgrade prompted it but, in fact, WWI had its causes somewhere else.

The profound tensions between the Habsburgs and the Serbs over Bosnia and over the wider South Slav question which triggered the war had little to do with the almighty destructive force unleashed over Europe...The Balkans was not the powder keg but merely one of a number of devices which might have acted as detonator...The First World War started in the Balkans and devastated the region but it was a European war and not a Balkan war.⁴⁵

However, the reverse argument can be more accurate. Instead of tracing the causes of the world wars in the Balkans, the Balkan conflicts could be traced in European dealings and influ-

⁴⁰ Tony Judt. Tale from Vienna Woods. Sept 28, 2000 accessed at <http://nybooks.com/articles/174>

⁴¹ Tony Judt. Tale from Vienna Woods. Sept 28, 2000 accessed at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/174>

⁴² Farred Zakaria. “The Rise of Illeberal Democracy.” Foreign Affairs, 76 November-December 1997, 22-43.

⁴³ Robert Kaplan. Balkan ghosts: a Journey Through History. New York: Vintage books. 1994, p. 287.

⁴⁴ Tom Gallagher. “A Balkan History Learning Curve” in European History Quarterly, Vol. 31, p. 147.

⁴⁵ Misha Glenny. *The Balkans : nationalism, war, and the Great Powers, 1804-1999*. New York : Viking, 2000, p. 463.

ence. Even though the Balkan wars in the twentieth century are “widely believed to offer definitive proof of Balkan madness,” they were not a result of Balkan nationalism *per se*.⁴⁶ Misha Glenny’s goes on to trace the brutality of Balkan nationalism in post-enlightenment Western ideology, rather than in domestic traditions and affinities for violence. He argues:

Balkan nationalism and militarism, as expressed in the Balkan wars, were in fact much more closely related to the practices and morality of great power imperialism than to local traditions. From the specific examples of Italy and Germany, and from logic learnt from the behavior of all Great Powers, the small circle of Balkan state builders learned one central lesson—force determines history. And force means a strong state which means centralization and a powerful army.⁴⁷

The West has set the world standards both for nation building and for warfare. Not surprisingly, the nation-building process in the Balkans was equally brutal and vicious. However, the Balkan nations were trapped between the “modern imperatives of the historical duties of the nation [*per se*]” and their own irrelevance in Great Powers’ politics. The result was internalization of the stigma “Balkan,” which partially explains the passionate nationalism and hyperbolic pride to be (Serb, Bulgarian, Albanian) as an “escape in the opposite direction.”⁴⁸ This

“escapism” led to tragic antagonisms and fervent differentiation among Balkan nations in a search for the authentic national “self.”

Are there any injustices inflicted on the Balkans? This is a question that seldom occurs in Western scholarly writing. The Balkans were often looked down upon as no more than tribal societies. This attitude can be demonstrated by Sir Austen Chamberlain’s benevolent approval of Mussolini’s ambitions to “represent Albania’s interests (without consulting the Albanians).”⁴⁹ It is probably worth noting that Chamberlain was a Nobel Prize laureate. In 1941, another exemplary Englishman, Sir Alexander Cadogan, the head of the British Foreign Office, confided to his diary that “All these Balkan peoples are trash.”⁵⁰ In fact, the Balkans have often deserved more credit than they had been historically granted.

Although it poses a positive example of ethnic tolerance and integration in the very heart of the Balkans—the gunpowder keg of Europe—Bulgaria was labeled an “irrational country.”⁵¹ Bulgarian society has traditionally been one of tolerance and diversity. Bulgaria accepted a large number of Armenian refugees during the Armenian Holocaust in 1915, who have integrated successfully and formed a prosperous minority group; likewise, Bulgarians, under the leadership of Boris III, did not allow the deportation

⁴⁶ Misha Glenny. *The Balkans : nationalism, war, and the Great Powers, 1804-1999*. New York : Viking, 2000, p. 457.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p.3.

⁴⁸ Alexander Kiossev. “The Dark Intimacy: Maps, Identities, Acts of Identifications,” accessed at <http://www.eurozine.com/article/2003-05-19-kiossev-en.html>

⁴⁹ Tom Gallagher. “A Balkan History Learning Curve” in *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 31, p. 148.

⁵⁰ Tom Gallagher. “A Balkan History Learning Curve” in *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 31, p. 151.

⁵¹ Robert Kaplan. *Balkan ghosts: a Journey Through History*. New York: Vintage books. 1994, p. 207.

of their Jewish populations to Nazi concentration camps during World War II, “an example more ‘civilized’ countries chose not to follow.”⁵² Right after this fact is mentioned, however, Western scholars cannot resist but say that Bulgarians, nevertheless, prosecuted Jews in Macedonia. Whenever a Balkan country is being praised there is an immediate necessity to bedraggle it. After only a few years of democratic rule, the damage done by communist repression against the Turkish minority in Bulgaria has been redeemed and ethnic Turks were allowed to participate in the Bulgarian democratic government. However, most of the Balkan multi-ethnic successes are repeatedly overlooked. Macedonia, too, deserves acknowledgment for the sustenance of peace, albeit fragile, in what are potentially volatile and combustible circumstances. Macedonia is the only Yugoslav republic that managed to dissociate itself from the federation without war. In a commendable example of ethnic tolerance, Macedonian leadership, at their own free will, have offered executive positions in the government to Albanians after the disintegration of the Yugoslav federation. Overall, most minorities in the Balkans such as the Bosnian Muslims in Yugoslavia, and the Hungarians in Romania used peaceful means to attain rights for the preservation and continuation of their traditions and identities.⁵³ Another remarkable display of religious tolerance was Salo-

nika upon the overthrow of Abdulhamid II by the Young Turks in 1908. Muslim and Armenians jointly paid homage to the 1896 genocide victims.

It was Austro-Hungary’s decision to annex Bosnia that antagonized Salonika to the Russian Tsar. In fact, “the decisive aspects of inter-war Balkan diplomacy were the Balkan policies of the great powers rather than the relations among the Balkan states.”⁵⁴ The frequent, untimely, and maladroit interference in the Balkans on behalf of the Great Powers such as the Berlin congress and Yalta have repeatedly complicated matters.

The compulsion...to grab new territory, with scant regard to the facts of demography or history, merely reflected the practices of their great neighbors whose arbitrary and foolhardy decisions at the Congress of Berlin had ensured that there was plenty of territory to dispute.⁵⁵

In fact, a great deal of the bloodshed in the region might have been avoided if the formation of a large Slavic state in 1878 had met less resistance from the Great Powers.⁵⁶ They, however, had different objectives to pursue. The aim of the 1878 Berlin Congress was to sustain the balance of power and thereby prevent the emergence of Anti-German alliance by cutting up the majority of the Balkan states. This cost the legitimacy of the Western

⁵² Misha Glenny. *The Balkans : nationalism, war, and the Great Powers, 1804-1999*. New York : Viking, 2000, p 452.

⁵³ Tom Gallagher. “A Balkan History Learning Curve” in *European History Quarterly*, Vol.31, 151.

⁵⁴ Tom Gallagher. “A Balkan History Learning Curve” in *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 31, 150.

⁵⁵ Misha Glenny. *The Balkans : nationalism, war, and the Great Powers, 1804-1999*. New York : Viking, 2000, p 452

⁵⁶ Gallagher explains that Bulgaria had the economic and socio-cultural potential to progress in state-building and act as a magnet to Serbia. The Berlin Congress spurned those chances. P 145

democracies as objective mediators in the Balkan affairs.

Another significant flaw in the politics of the Great Powers in the region is their inadequate revision of the political map of the region. While recognizing certain borders, they denied acknowledgment of others. Evoking Croatia's claims of cultural affinity with the European family, Franjo Tudjman managed to win the favors of the German Foreign Minister at the time—Hans Friedrich Genschner. Genschner became a staunch apologist for the Croatian cause and ensured a hasty recognition of both Croatia and Slovenia. Soon, however, it became clear that this threatened to turn into a quagmire the exodus from which will be painful for all involved. Thus, the West still does not want to recognize the autonomous status of Kosovo. It is clear to all, however, that Kosovo's recognition is not a question of whether, but rather a question of when. To what then shall we attribute the West obvious unwillingness to grant Kosovo autonomy? One possible answer is that such recognition might prove a slippery slope and might trigger cessations elsewhere, an outcome the West wants to avoid at all costs. Thus, the Western powers have engaged in something they do not have the courage, knowledge or legitimacy to do—define the political boundaries of states in the Balkans and grant recognitions exclusively. It is uncertain whether the political or the cultural borders that the West has redrawn is a more alarming pattern.

In this relation, it is interesting to consider the status of Greece in the Balkan discourse. A member of the EU since 1981, Greece is undoubtedly considered part of the geographic and

cultural unity of Europe. This, however, poses considerable problems since it does not allow the rejection of the Balkan Peninsula from Europe in purely geographic terms. It is an arduous task to establish whether Turkey does or does not belong to the Balkans and Europe. What is more important, however, is to establish if the Balkan parameters apply to Turkey.

In relation to its application for membership the EU, a hot debate surrounded Turkey's geographical exclusion/inclusion from Europe. Curiously, the same argument was not raised when Malta's candidacy was considered. Malta has long been a stepping stone between North Africa and Europe, just like Turkey has been a stepping stone between Europe and Asia. However, Malta's cultural difference was not evoked as it is often done with Turkey. In fact, both Malta's traditional music and folklore point to their African heritage much more than to their European proximity.⁵⁷ Perhaps Malta's history as a British colony or the fact its population is largely Catholic was enough to render it culturally compatible with Europe. Clearly, geographical inclusion and cultural compatibility are useful and often used tools that provide valuable space for Western politicians and scholars to maneuver. This is all too reminiscent of the Balkan discourse and the treatment of the Balkans. Aren't such comments concerning geography the equivalent of how Tony Blair referred to Kosovo?⁵⁸

⁵⁷ For more information on Maltese folklore see <http://www.rootsworld.com/reviews/etnika.shtml>

⁵⁸ Misha Glenny. *The Balkans : nationalism, war, and the Great Powers, 1804-1999*. New York : Viking, 2000, p 432.

I will allow myself to diverge in order to examine this point more thoroughly so that it does not seem unsubstantiated.

At the Helsinki summit in 1999 Turkey was officially recognized as a candidate for EU accession. Even though the process was hard and painful, this summer Turkey finally conformed and implemented reforms that lifted all language and cultural restrictions imposed on Kurds. Nevertheless, Turkey's prospects of admission, pundits admit, are still distant. A couple of arguments have been raised as to the reasons why Turkey will not be allowed in the EU. One is the on-going suppression of Kurdish rights; other—the size and the influence of the Turkish army. Yet another, the overwhelming advantage in ministerial votes and in representatives Turkey will have in the European Parliament. However, Poland's potential to block decisions has not raised so much alarm. Let's not forget, however, that Poland is one of the strongholds of Catholicism in Europe. The center of gravity might as well turn east to the countries of the Soviet bloc. Real displeasure for leading forces in Europe, however, comes only when a *Muslim* country has some power to block "important" decisions. What many people leave unsaid, however, is the perception of Turkey as "the Other"—echoing the perception of the Balkans. The heart of the matter is not migration, not agriculture, nor overpopulation. The question is something else—an often-recurring pattern in "European" behavior that works against Turkey, just as much as it works against the Balkan Slavs.

In this regard, examining some of the comments the Founding Fathers of the EU have made will be curious and may throw light on the sentiments in

Europe in regard to Turkey's accession and Turkey *per se*. Giscard d'Estaing—one of the main authors of Europe's constitution—bluntly declared that Turkey's integration in the EU would mean the end of Europe.⁵⁹ While it is true that Turkey still needs to undergo certain democratic reforms, d'Estaing's remarks go much further. One can see the obvious ethnocentrism at work here. It is precisely this Eurocentrism that Edward Said criticized in his *Orientalism*.⁶⁰ The cultural incompatibility evoked is just another name for the "us vs. them" categorization that we already encountered with the Balkans. Similar to the Balkan discourse, all representations of Turkey are tainted by the language, culture, institutions and political ambience of the representer. This is a perfect description of d'Estaing's assertions that "[Turkey has] a different culture, a different approach, and a different way of life. It is not a European country." Obviously, Malta is. Moreover, the latter stressed that those in support of Turkey's candidacy were "the adversaries of the European Union."⁶¹ This viewpoint was supported by another big figure in the history of the EU—Helmut Schmidt.⁶² Schmidt

⁵⁹President of France (1974-81), deputy finance minister (1959-62), and finance minister (1962-66). D'Estaing serves in the European Parliament (1989-93, 1997-). In 2001 he was appointed president of the Convention on the Future of Europe, which is charged with drafting a new constitution for the European Union.

⁶⁰ Edward Said. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

⁶¹ D'Estaing's comments are accessed at <http://www.dawn.com/2002/11/09/int1.htm>

⁶² A former Federal German Chancellor, Schmidt was one of the founders of the committee supporting the European Monetary Union, the European Economic Union together

emphasized that Turkey's admission to the EU "would open the door for similarly plausible full memberships of other Muslim nations in Africa and the Middle East."⁶³ Schmidt went so far as to note that:

Thanks to the church and the crusades, most Europeans since the Middle Ages have grown up with a hostile rejection of Islam. And from the Islamic side admonitions for religious tolerance occur with scarcity. Islam lacks the developmental influences of the renaissance, the enlightenment and the separation of spiritual and political authority, which are so decisive for European culture.⁶⁴

Such comments are ignorant of the complexities of Islam. They are also in tune with the profound discomfort associated with Turkey's prospects of becoming the largest Muslim minority in the EU. Furthermore, the Pope demands that "the decisive contribution of Christianity and Christian vision to the history and culture of Europe" be explicitly mentioned in the constitution of Europe. If the EU is thus defined in Christian terms, it is no wonder that Mr. Schmidt perceives a potential threat in the plausible membership of Muslim countries, as if this would create a clash between Islam and Christendom. The similarities with the rhetoric on the Balkan countries (Turkey is not considered Balkan by European standards) are striking. European elites long defined themselves in contrast to what they saw as

the decadent, effete, depraved, and weak societies of "the East," dominated by the Ottoman Empire. Both images, although forged in the eighteenth century, have persisted into the current one, and for many they continue to define Turkey as outside the scope of European culture."⁶⁵

This argument is often touched upon in discussions but is seldom given any consideration. Rather, it gives way to a more convenient rationale. It is true that the party now elected in Turkey has Islamic roots. It should be noted, however, that the AK (Justice and Development) Party attempts to do anything to satisfy European demands and has embarked to differentiate between politics and Islam, claiming that the latter should be regarded as a personal and rather intimate matter. AK leader—Recep Tayip Erdogan—has announced EU accession as Turkey's number one priority. AK's liberal Islam doctrine aims to diminish the Islamic agenda and to align with the West. All this was aimed at the West. Europeans, however, did not get the message, or, rather, did not want to.

The Kurdish question has come to raise a lot of discussions. Often criticized for its domestic policies in this respect, Turkey has been labeled a non-democratic country and has been duly excluded from the European club. But exactly how democratic are the European states. In fact, they readily surrender their democratic ideals when confronted by a threat that cannot be tackled in a "democratic" manner. Britain's policy regarding Northern Ireland is a fitting example. Turkey has endured harsh criticism for the

with Giscard D'estaing in 1986, and the creation of the European Central Bank.

⁶³ For more information, see "Is Turkey Ready for Europe?" in *Foreign Affairs*—May/June, 2003, p. 97.

⁶⁴ For more information, see Paul Kieffer, "Who's Afraid From Turkey" at <http://www.ucg.org/wnp/wnp0302/turkey.htm>

⁶⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978, p. 98.

treatment of the Kurdish issue. But in fact, the provisions of the Prevention of Terrorism Act in Britain, Ronnie Marguiles—a specialist on Turkish politics—argues, are precisely as draconian as [were] those of the “Struggle Against Terrorism Law” in Turkey.⁶⁶ Marguiles goes on to explain the difference of casualties in the bigger terrain challenges that Irish republicans face. “Faced with a commensurate threat, the British state would respond no less ruthlessly and undemocratically.”

Turkey has already abolished the capital punishment and has lifted the restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language. Once those reforms were passed, their “actual enactment” came to be questioned by Europeans. It is only logical to ask who has the legitimacy, and what is more, the objectivity, to judge for the “actual enactment” of those reforms. Thus, the matter of actual enactment becomes a convenient justification for “feet dragging” on the side of the EU. Double standards become obvious considering that many nations that do not adhere to the Copenhagen criteria were invited. Not to mention that even France and Germany fail some of the fiscal requirements. Turkey gained an associate membership in 1963 and a candidate status in 1979. In a way, Turkey has already lost its economic sovereignty by opening its borders and exposing its producers to international competition. Turkey’s decision to forge a Customs Union agreement with the EU in 1995 has been harshly criticized domestically. Thus, along with the economic burdens and bene-

fits of the union, Turkey ended up with having no voice in EU’s foreign trade policies. The Cold War was an opportunity that Turkey seized and became a NATO member. Now that Turkey is not a means for attaining some military or other aim, it is not clear how long this accession process will take.

With this paper I attempted to increase the awareness of the inadequacies of discourses of any type and the Balkan one in particular. The concept “The Balkans” may have been a geographical designation; presently, however, it signifies the existence of a non-geographical referent. Any attempt to come up with a rigid definition of the essential Balkan specimen is bound to be loaded with certain ideological assumptions and biases. Balkan’s present and future have been long searched for in record books and histories centuries ago. All this points to the need for more dynamism and objectivity in scholarship exploring the region.

The Balkans have often been depicted as a meeting point between Europe and Asia where Islam and Christianity meet. Therefore, the Balkans are considered the perfect place for their reconciliation. The Balkans, therefore have the potential to refute “clash of civilization theories.” Thus, rather than stress and emphasize dichotomies, while pretending to be treating Balkan states fairly, European leaders should discern and seize this opportunity.

⁶⁶ Ronnie Marguiles. “Turkey and the European Union” in Middle East Report. April-June 1996.

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