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## **Contested Borders, Contested Identity: The Case of Regionalism in South East Europe**

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### Abstract

Regionalism has become one of the prevailing trends in world politics nowadays. Regions are seen as proceeding from socio-economic linkages, but also from shared notions of belonging. There are two approaches to regional identity. The first one focuses on common culture, language, historical experience. The second approach views regions as a sort of 'imagined community' or political constructs. The paper takes up the latter view and argues that the redefinition of regional identity exemplified by the substitution of the term 'Balkans' with 'South East Europe' played a crucial role in the cooperation initiatives since the mid-1990s. It explores schemes such as the South Eastern European Cooperation Process (SEEC) and the Stability Pact for South East Europe to highlighting two important conclusions. First, the South East European project has been an attempt to overcome the area's marginalisation vis-à-vis the West. Second, the emergence of a coherent regional identity was inhibited by the impossibility to draw clear-cut borders in order to demarcate South East Europe.

Keywords: South East Europe, regionalism, identity, history, interstate politics

## **Introduction**

The very subject of my paper might require an unduly lengthy introductory part. This has to do with the need to clarify what I mean by several things: South East Europe, identity and regionalism are all far from being straightforward and unproblematic. As the paper itself grapples with the issue of regional identity, let me concentrate here on the last term in the list.

Similar to geopolitical and historical concepts like ‘Balkans’ and ‘South East Europe’, not to mention the buzzword ‘identity’, the notion of regionalism is characterised by nearly unmatched vagueness. It is even amazing how many different, if not opposing, meanings region, hence regionalism, have both in scholarly and popular talk. Indeed, region can be anything ranging from an area within a single state to a whole continent. Both Europe and the Basque country are regions in their own right. This ambiguity is reflected in how we use terms like ‘regionalism’, ‘regionalisation’, ‘region-building’ and the like. In the EU context, regionalisation is often taken to denote a process whereby political and economic power is devolved from the centre to the local level. This is usually accompanied by the reemergence of various local – regional, ethnic and so forth - identities, previously suppressed within the nation-state. In many instances, these recalcitrant identities go beyond state borders linking neighbouring areas and populations. These developments, in turn, give rise to theoretical arguments that the old (Western) European territorial order is being overhauled (Jeffery, 1997). At the same time, the movement towards pooling - rather than decentralising - state power is labeled regionalisation too. regionalisation may be equal to integration. The EC/EU is a case in point. The buildup of common market underpinned by a web of supranational institutions and socio-economic links is interpreted by some as a movement towards building a regional polity in Europe. At present, one witnesses increased economic integration in many parts of the world, from Latin America to East Asia, giving rise to new debates in international relations and the subfield of international political economy (Hurrell and Fawcett, 1996). Arguably, in the EU, the move below and above the state are, almost invariably, intertwined. The supranational institutions are seen as strengthening localism

and vice versa, in that both undermine the power of the state. Reminiscent of Russian dolls, present-day Europe can be pictured as a region containing states, but also smaller non-sovereign entities (e.g. Cataluna, Emilia-Romagna, Scotland etc), which are again referred to as regions. There are indications that similar processes are underway in the accession countries to the east where a number of so-called Euroregions, both within a single state or spanning across international borders, have emerged seeking a place in the political map and, importantly, representation in Brussels (Wolczuk and Batt, 2002).

The above excursion illustrates the need for greater conceptual clarity before approaching the broad themes of regionness, regional identity, region-building. My aim here is to discuss a third type of phenomenon, distinct from both supranational and substate regionalism.. Since the early 1990s, post-communist states in Eastern or, to abide by the already established conventions, Central and Eastern Europe and their neighbours have come together in a number of groupings aimed at fostering cooperation in the fields of politics, security and the economy. Acronyms like CEFTA, BSEC, CEI, to name a few, have become commonplace in the political and diplomatic jargon. The proliferation of such arrangements has prompted some observers to coin the term ‘subregionalism’ in order to distinguish it from larger integration projects, most notably the EU (Cottey, 1999; Dwan, 1999). This paper treats ‘regionalism’ and ‘subregionalism’ as synonyms. It explores the origins and dynamics of the cooperative processes and schemes in South East Europe since the mid-1990s. Doing so, it develops the argument that regional identity and discursively constructed borders, although often overlooked by the analysts, have played a key role. The paper also presents the debates on Balkan identity and utilises the insights of critical historiographers like Maria Todorova as an analytical tool for studying regionalism. It concludes that, in South East Europe, the absence of a clear-cut sense of belonging to a joint community has impeded the deepening of the existing cooperation initiatives. In the short term, however, the stigmatisation of the Balkans has proven to be an incentive for cooperative action on a regional scale.

### **Do identities matter?**

Over the last couple of decades, culture and identity are gaining an ever growing importance in all social sciences, not least in the discipline of international relations and (Kratochwil and Lapid, 1996; Krauze and Renwick, 1996). There is a sufficient reason for that disciplines such as international relations have been dominated by a host of rationalist theories. Studying international politics, scholars have highlighted material capabilities and constraints as main variables accounting for the behaviour of states posited as rational actors. It has also been hypothesised that the prime motivation in the world politics arena is the maximisation of one's security and wealth. While material interest and gain-seeking are presumed to rule supreme, ideas are, at best, given a complementary place (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993). Arguably, in the post-Cold War era, this tendency has been detrimental to the attempts to bring hugely important phenomena nationalism and, more broadly, nationhood on the research agenda. Turning to the Balkans, it is virtually impossible to look at interstate relations without taking into account the impact of the national idea in the course of the last two hundred years. The latter is constitutive of the local states, insofar as state legitimacy is derived from the ethnic nation's right to self-determination and self-government. Second, identity has had behavioural effects too: irredentism stands out as a prime example for that. There is, furthermore, a fair number of international relations scholars studying the process whereby ideas and identities drive state action and configure interests (Chafetz, Spirtas and Frankel, 1999; Katzenstein, 1996).

There is much more at stake in the debates over how interest and identity relate to one another than just a theoretical issue. Undoubtedly, nationalist antagonisms, a specimen *par excellence* of identity politics, at the root of many evils in the Balkans today. In the 1990s, the wars of Yugoslav succession led to political fragmentation, economic decline, proliferation of weak states and rise of organised crime. One of the remedies prescribed by the outside powerbrokers is a shift towards pragmatism. Why not ditch the old ethno-national agenda and concentrate on democratisation, reconstruction and development, transition towards market economies? Why not transcend border-drawing and nation-building, inevitably tied with homogenisation and exclusion of ethnic minorities, in the

name of rational action for all Balkan citizens' good based on the values of co-existence and material welfare? The appeal to common interests has underscored most regional cooperation schemes since the 1995 Dayton peace. Regional cooperation is, in a way, antithetical to 'Balkan identity', in that the latter is marked by strife and historical rivalries. Coupled with democratisation, the economic and social linkages resulting from working jointly are expected to bridge the entrenched divisions related to ethnonational identity. Indeed, the experience of the EC where functional cooperation in specific sectors has cemented the political rapprochement between old rivals is often quoted in the South East European context as a model to emulate.

That policy approach is consistent with the rationalist thinking about regionalism (Hurrell: 1996). On one hand, it links the rise of interstate cooperation with the presence of a hegemonic power or alternatively the effects of institutions, existing interdependence or cooperation spillover across sectors (Krasner 1983; Keohane 1983; Keohane 1989; Haas, 1958). In other words, we-ness and shared notions of belonging have a secondary, if any, significance with regard to regionalisation. Geographical proximity accounts for more than regional identity. In the Balkans, what drives interstate cooperation is the pressure coming from the outside actors interested in promoting greater stability, notably EU and NATO, and the myriad of issues that can be addressed only on a regional basis. A rationalist version of the story is within sight.

### **What is Balkan identity?**

While it is hard to disprove the role of material interdependence or the importance of powerful outsiders as promoters of cooperation at the regional level, I maintain that shared identity has played a crucial role in regionalisation projects in South East Europe. This claim necessitates a more elaborate explanation of what is understood by regional identity.

As in the case of nationhood, the views on 'regionness' oscillate between the poles of primordialism and constructivism. There could, nevertheless, be multiple midpoints between the extreme views that regions are 'natural' communities rooted in culture and

shared past, conversely, they are malleable imagined communities. While overlaps are not rare, I define the three main positions in the debate: primordialist, historicist and constructivist.

### 1. Primordialists

According to the primordialists, regional identity reflects set of commonalities related to social psychology, prevailing familial structures, language, shared worldviews etc. Whether one thinks about the substate units or the larger areas populated by states, regions are habitually thought of as more or less stable entities with clear-cut borders defined by specific cultural content. What is more, they are always 'there', ready to be discovered, studied and classified on the basis of their constitutive features. There is no shortage of such scholarship as far as the South East Europe goes (Bracewell and Drace-Francis 1999:54-56). Thus, Fernand Braudel's disciple Trajan Stojanovich views the Balkan peninsula as a millennia-old cultural space, part of what he describes as 'the first Europe' of the classical antiquity (Stojanovich 1967, 1994). In a similar mode, antropogeographers as Jacques Ancel and Jovan Cvijić explore the commonality of dress, architecture, ideas of space and time (Ancel 1929, Cvijić 1918, Pippidi 1999:96). Cvijić even goes one step further elaborating the notion of *homo balcanicus* based on a distinctive Balkan *mentalité*. It is a small wonder that such strong claims have caused considerable controversy. Paschalis Kitromilides argues that Cvijić's Balkan *mentalité* must be placed in a temporal framework and projects it in the pre-national Orthodox oecumene of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He maintains that the advent of nationalism ultimately dealt a deadly blow to all universalist worldviews, which, to him, were constitutive of Balkan *mentalité*. This is exemplified by the disintegration of the *Rum millet*, the community of Orthodox believers institutionalised within the Ottoman empire, swept away by the forces of national particularism (Kitromilides, 1996).

Whatever the benefits of each side of the dispute, it is clear that those invoking culture tend to conceive of identity in markedly essential terms, that is outside time and space. It does not take much insight to grasp that this position is akin to the claims about entrenched fault lines in South East Europe. To cite one widely-publicised example, the

Huntingtonian reading of the Balkans, as hopelessly divided by the impregnable borders of Islam, Orthodox and Catholic Christianity, is grounded on an analogous view of cultural and religious identity (Huntington, 1993, 1996). So is its cognate ‘ancient hatreds’ thesis gaining prominence with the war in Bosnia (Malcolm, 1996: xix-xxii). If one believes in some sort of deep-rooted Balkanness, why not stick a finger at it and blame it for the recurrent violence in the European southeast? Shared culture can explain why the Balkans lack a common political identity almost as easily as it can demonstrate that national divisions are not insurmountable. It is understandable that the most committed critics of the essentialist ‘ethnic hatreds’ myth are equally skeptical about the monolithic notion of *homo balcanicus*. What they see instead of the reified cultural identities is a multiplicity of ambiguous, overlapping and time- and space-contingent selves. (Kiossev, 2002, Savić and Bjelić, 2002).

## 2. ‘Continualists’

Unsurprisingly, the continualists’ arguments merit greater attention than the ones advanced by the culturalists of different colours. Similar to the culturalists, some historians dwell on the impact of *longue duree*, yet remain conscious about change. Nicolae Iorga’s idea of *Byzance après Byzance* exemplifies that approach (Iorga, 1929, 1935). In a somewhat similar vein, Maria Todorova maintains that Balkan specificities are, by and large, a product of the Ottoman era. Not unlike Kitromilides, however, she believes that, on the whole, this imperial legacy is becoming extinct and is washed away by the waves of modernity. What used to be ‘Turkey-in-Europe’ is preserved in marginal spheres such as cuisine and popular culture, which is distinctive from dominant national cultures (Todorova, 1997:161-184). To a large degree, Todorova concurs with Alexandru Duțu that presently the region can be taken as a meaningful whole only in view of the common set of problems related to modernisation and political and socio-economic transition (Duțu, 1995)

More commonly, however, the Balkans are studied as something akin to what an international relations theorist might call a regional subsystem. Located in the same neighbourhood and emerging one after the other from the Ottoman domination, the

Balkan states had a tradition of interacting, whether in cooperative or conflictual mode (Jelavich 1983; Hoesch, 1988; Glenny, 2000; Mazower, 2001). The paramount factor is certainly their geographical proximity translated into intertwined political and security interests. Yet, the picture becomes messier at closer glance. During the Cold War years, the Balkan states were for the most part oriented towards the outside, which meant that the region did not constitute a coherent unit. After 1944 Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia and Albania became part of the Soviet sphere of influence, while Turkey and Greece remained on the other side of the Iron Curtain. With the 1948 Cominform split between Tito and Stalin, Yugoslavia left the Soviet camp and started developing its own model of self-management socialism. For decades, it played the part of a balancer between the East and West and leader of the non-aligned movement. Romania, too, tried to escape from Moscow's fold and pursue a more independent course. Further south, Enver Hoxha's Albania aligned in the 1960s with China, but by the 1980s cut its ties with Beijing and sank in full isolation from the rest of the world (Crampton, 2001). The decades of division resulted in phenomena as diverse as the widespread parochialism characterising national historiographies or the negligible volumes of intraregional trade (Pavlowitch, 1999:336; Uvalic: 2001). It was not until the 1990s that the Balkans reappeared on the political landscape as a distinctive regional grouping (Mazower 2001:5).

Both primordialists and historians study the Balkans in terms of continuities, but one should nevertheless put the two schools in different baskets. Historians are by definition more sensitive to context. What both schools share, however, is the question what sets the Balkans apart from the neighbouring areas. In other words, what is the criterion that we should use to demarcate the Balkans? Furthermore, one must demonstrate that the region's outer limits are more important than the multiple dividing lines inside it. Indeed, the Balkans' ethnic, political and cultural heterogeneity present anyone willing to tread the shaky ground of commonalities, legacies and uniqueness with a daunting task.

Geography is one way to circumvent historical complexities. After all, it is easy to point the Balkan peninsula on the map. Yet geography is not immune to politics. Setting the region's northern border, for instance, is an overwhelmingly controversial issue (cf.

Pawlowitch, 331). Is Slovenia a Balkan state? How about Croatia and Romania? Over time, all those countries have strived to renounce the idea of being part of the Balkans citing Catholicism, Austro-Hungarian past, Latin heritage in support of their case. Turkey represents yet another example of how malleable and ambiguous space classifications are, although the debate of its Europeanness largely obscures the question of whether it is a Balkan country or not. One thing is certain: cultural, political and geographical arguments are inextricably interlinked. What ultimately matters is how space and belonging is interpreted in the political process.

### 3. Constructivists

The above insight is useful for introducing the constructivist position. It is best synthesised by Iver Neumann, according to whom ‘regions are invented by political actors as a political programme, they are not simply waiting to be discovered’ (Neumann, 2001). Regional identity, therefore, is what people, politicians and states make out of it; it is how they interpret history and culture. Consider political constructs like ‘Eastern Europe’, for instance. For the historian Larry Wolff, it does not go further back in time than the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The east -west division was yet another brainchild of the Enlightenment thinkers, who underplayed earlier divisions in Europe between south and north (Wolff, 1994). In the twentieth century, Eastern Europe was solidified as a political reality with the Cold War only to be challenged in the 1980s by a group of Polish, Czech and Hungarian intellectuals. The latter argued for the distinctiveness of Central Europe as ‘more European’ in terms of values and history than what lay further east, namely Russia. They were the captured Europe, suffering in the clouts of a foreign power (Garton Ash, 1989; Schoepflin, 1989; Graubard, 1991; Todorova, 1997: Ch 6). What we learn from constructivists, therefore, is that defining others and drawing border between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is of immense importance for articulating selfs, be they national or regional.

South East Europe has been a fertile ground for those arguing about the critical role of imagination and ‘othering’. Building on the work of Edward Said, Milica Bakić Hayden and Robert Hayden explored how nationalists across Yugoslavia claimed cultural

superiority over 'Balkan' contenders, raising the banner of their own imputed 'Europeanness' (Said, 1979; Hayden and Bakić Hayden, 1992; Bakić Hayden, 1995). The Balkans has been conceptualised in uniquely negative terms, while balkanness has been equated to backwardness and opposed to the democratic and enlightened West. Maria Todorova's seminal book *Imagining the Balkans* traced the emergence of what she characterises as the balkanist discourse distinguishable from Said's orientalism. She maintains that unlike the Orient the Balkans are geographically specific and that their ontological status is more ambiguous. Located both inside and outside what is thought as Europe, the Balkans' irrationality and unique proneness to violence makes them thoroughly un-European. (Todorova, 1997:17-18, Mazower, 2001: 5-11). Although John Allcock should be credited for his pioneering analysis of balkanism, it was Todorova's work to launch a debate of major intellectual and political significance (Allcock, 1991, Goldsworthy, 1998, Bjelić and Savić, 2002). What makes Todorova relevant to the study of interstate politics, however, is her contention that negative Balkan identity is observed in the discourse of elites and populaces across South East Europe (Todorova, 1997: Ch 2). They either accept the stigma of being Balkan or project it onto their neighbours in order to assert their own 'Europeanness.' As the significance of this shared conception of Balkanness is easy to grasp, it is safe to assume that it is present in the way interstate politics in the neighbourhood are thought of by the local policy-makers. I use his particular notion of negative regional identity to analyse the process of interstate cooperation.

### **The Invention of South East Europe**

The transition from a negative to a positive international identity for the Balkan countries has been part and parcel of regional cooperation. The reason for that is intimately related to the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia popularised as 'the wars in the Balkans' and giving new currency to terms as 'balkanisation.' The conflict in Bosnia, furthermore, gave credence to the assertions that a larger war encompassing all of the Balkans may follow suit (Larabee, 1994). Ignoring the purely Yugoslav dimensions of the Bosnian tragedy, a cohort of journalists-cum-historians and academics took up the ancient hatreds to revive the image of the Balkans eternal powder-keg in European, if not global, politics

(Kaplan, 1993, Kennan, 1993). According to a doomsday plot, the 'Third Balkan War' would erupt by an explosion of hostilities in the Serb province of Kosovo and further south in the newly independent Republic of Macedonia. Macedonia's neighbouring states – harbouring as they were claims towards its territory and population – would not falter to become embroiled in a conflict between Slav Macedonians and the Albanian minority. With the simmering Greek-Turkish tensions re-inflamed, a new regional conflict would materialise - something of a local *bellum omnium contra omnes* or, according to others, a war along religious lines. The Balkans were, at most, a future battlefield or, at least, a gray zone where states and nations were desperately enmeshed in a never ending cycle of conflicts.

Although the Third Balkan War did not happen neither in 1991-95, nor in 1998-99 (Kosovo), nor indeed in 2001 (Macedonia), Balkan stereotypes did not relate solely to violence and disorder. States like Romania and Bulgaria, which stayed aside from the Yugoslav wars, were easily classifiable as Balkan based on the thorny progress of economic reforms after 1989. It was Balkan character provided a handy explanation:

'A new curtain is falling across eastern Europe, dividing north from south, west from east, rich from poor and the future from the past. As Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic sprint into the future of democracy and market economics, Romania and Bulgaria slide into Balkan backwardness and second-class citizenship in the new Europe.' (Longworth, 1994)

The Balkan stigma was not reserved exclusively for the warring parties around Sarajevo or in the mountains of Northern Dalmatia, but was applied to every state and society in the geographical perimeter. Even EU member Greece was not spared in light of the confrontation with Skopje over the name and symbols of the 'former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.' Most importantly, in the West, the balkanist discourse recommended a policy of non-engagement in the region. A common refrain in the days of the Bosnian war was, for example, minimal engagement and caution in order not to bog down in the

cycle of ethnic warfare. The turbulent area, perennially plagued by ancient hatreds and backwardness had to be safely quarantined.

The image of essential un-Europeanness and the opening gap between the Balkans and Visegrad group prompted what Romanian politician Elena Zamfirescu described as ‘the flight from the Balkans.’ (Zamfirescu, 1995). Ironically, it was Croatia’s President Dr Franjo Tudjman, one of the protagonists in the Yugoslav drama, who best illustrated that phenomenon. While thoroughly engaged in the Bosnian war, he was keenly asserting that in its struggle for independence Croatia was really choosing Europe and leaving the Balkans. Nationalists around Tudjman exploited the myth of Croatia as an ages-old *antemurale Christianitatis*, a bulwark against the barbarian invaders, to boost their European credentials (Lindstrom and Razsa, 1999). Official Romanian rhetoric followed a similar line singling out Latinness or Central European roots as bonds with Europe (Gallagher, 1997). Slovenia, following the brief war in 1991, staged the quickest escape from the Balkans fuelled by economic prosperity and rapid rapprochement with the West. Central Europe and its budding regional institutions was a magnet for the fugitives from the Balkans. For Croatia, Slovenia and Romania joining arrangements like the Central European Initiative and the Central European Free Trade Association (CEFTA) became a priority. The political logic of that move was crystal-clear. While the Balkan states were certainly the left-outs in the eastern enlargement of EU and NATO, ineligible on both political and civilisational grounds, Central Europe was a springboard for ‘joining Europe.’

Coupled with instability in former Yugoslavia, the tendency towards identification with Central Europe did not augur well for any form of multilateral cooperation in South East Europe. That was partially offset by the international efforts to extinguish the conflicts in former Yugoslavia. In the wake of the Dayton peace, both the EU and the USA each launched their own initiatives aimed at fostering stability in the Balkans, convinced that a wider regional approach is a must. Thus, the EU’s Royaumont scheme promoted political dialogue among the former Yugoslav republics and their neighbours, while the

US-promoted South East European Cooperation Initiative (SECI) pushed for cooperation in the fields of trade, transport, and border controls (Lopandić, 2001:117-123, 125-136).

At the same time, in 1996-1997, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Macedonia, Romania and Yugoslavia restarted the process of ministerial meetings. Dating back to the conferences in Belgrade and Tirana in 1988 and 1990, it was halted by the breakup of Yugoslavia (Veremis, 1995). Once launched anew, the regional dialogue intensified leading in November 1997 to the first Crete Summit of heads of state and government, an unprecedented occurrence in Balkan history. The initiative featuring yearly conferences at both foreign minister and head of state level crystallised into the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECF) (Alp, 2000; Tsardanides, 2001). Slovenia did not partake in SEECF, while Croatia opted for an observer position. Tudjman, furthermore, opposed the inclusion in SECI seeing it as a plot to recreate Yugoslavia and push Croatia back into the Balkans. In January 1998, the Croatian Parliament passed a constitutional amendment prohibiting membership in any regional association that could recreate in any form Yugoslavia (Simić, 2001). Interestingly, Hungary was prepared to be a part of SECI without much heated debates, while Slovenia stayed an observer. Military cooperation proceeded more smoothly. The Balkan countries' part of NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program established a ministerial forum named the South East European Defence Ministerial (SEDM). It did not include Croatia, Bosnia and Yugoslavia (all outside PfP at the time), while Italy became full-member, and Slovenia and USA observers.

All these initiatives differ pronouncedly, depending on whether they were conceived locally or from the outside. The outside-driven ones are typically wider in scope and more pragmatically oriented. Thus, the SEDM, boosted by US Secretary of Defence William Cohen's personal involvement, embarked on an ambitious project of building-up a Balkan peacekeeping unit under an international agreement signed in late 1998. Three years later, the Multinational Peace Force for South East Europe was declared operational. The Royaumont and SECI aimed at concrete projects in the political and socio-economic sphere, yet lacked the needed funds of their own. After 1999, however,

they were both subsumed in the Stability Pact for South East Europe (SP) a comprehensive scheme launched in the aftermath of the Kosovo conflict. The SP's First and Second Working Tables, dealing with democratisation and economic cooperation respectively, in effect reduplicated the priorities of Royaumont and SECI. The Third Working Table focused on projects in the field of military security and justice and home affairs. Unlike SECI and Royaumont, the projects under the SP are backed from international donors like the EU, its member states, the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), USA, Canada etc. What has also been distinctive about the Pact is that it targets the Balkan states on individual and group basis. Its regional cooperation agenda is, therefore, far-reaching particularly in the economic sphere where the bulk of the money is spent. Thus, following a memorandum of understanding initialed in 2001 by all South East European states (Croatia included, but not Greece and Turkey), the Pact undertook to establish a free-trade zone in the region. Currently, it focuses on creating an integrated electricity market, while also channeling money into intra- and transregional infrastructure.

Clearly, the outside-promoted schemes have been premised on the idea that a number of the problems faced by the countries in South East Europe can be solved only on a regional basis. They see the post-communist Balkan countries as either sharing a set of common problems related to transition and ethnic politics or as an interdependent complex. Those initiatives, therefore, have reflected a certain conception of regionness as interdependence. The great stake of outside actors and institutions, on the other hand, has been a guarantee that some 'Balkan fugitives' like Croatia and Romania are onboard. Overall, the levels of political support for SP and similar initiatives have largely been a function of the perceived utility in terms of EU and NATO accession. Money and political commitment have driven regional cooperation.

Negative regional identity has been much more consequential in the case of the SEECP. By the end of the 1990s, the only initiative launched by South East European states themselves emerged a high-level forum for discussing the pressing issues of the region. Although it undertook to develop common infrastructure and economic projects, SEECP

busied itself mainly with changing the international perceptions of the Balkans. Despite the Greek proposals to that effect, SEECP failed to develop into an international organisation, mainly because EU-hopefuls like Romania and Bulgaria were not particularly enthusiastic about being packaged in a single group with their neighbours from former Yugoslavia (Stefanova, 2000). In addition, SEECP's efforts to influence Yugoslavia's intransigent position over Kosovo in 1998 ended with a failure. For the most part, the forum engaged in sort of declaratory diplomacy to reaffirm they subscribe to the principles of inviolability of existing borders, non-violence, observance of minority rights etc. Its highest achievement to date is the Bucharest Charter for Good-Neighbourliness, Stability, Security and Cooperation in South East Europe codifying those principles. Importantly, the adherence to the norms of the Bucharest Charter as well as to the philosophy of regional cooperation was considered a proof of compatibility with the constitutive values of both NATO and the EU.

Like SEDM, SP and SECI, the SEECP also promoted South East Europe as self-definition. Unlike the Balkans, it was taken to be geographically neutral and not loaded as with negative symbolism. There was, of course, much more than that. South East Europe meant an openness towards the enlargement process and reflected the idea that regionalisation and accession are the two faces of the same coin. Among other things, this was intended as a politically correct appellation meant to appease states feeling uneasy about being qualified as Balkan. The choice for South East Europe also pointed at an attempt to transcend the discursive divisions separating Balkans and Europe (cf. O Tuathail, 2000). The Crete Summit's final statement read the following:

‘We believe that Europe cannot be complete without our countries and our peoples representing civilisations and historical traditions which are essential to the establishment of a contemporary European identity.’ (Triantafyllou and Veremis, 1998: 485-494)

Accepting South East Europe as a new political identity amounts to an endeavour to do away with the marginalisation of the Balkan countries vis-à-vis ‘Europe.’ This, in turn,

has provided a rationale for a talk-shop like SEECP, which has produced few breaking news apart from the bilateral *tete-a-tetes* between foreign ministers or presidents.

The very name South East Europe has nevertheless given rise to serious objections. Unsurprisingly, students of regional history figure prominently among the critical voices. The Turkish historian of the late Ottoman Empire Ilber Ortayli has pointed out that the substitution of Balkans with South East Europe in fact seeks to downplay the heritage of 'Turkey-in-Europe.' "Why use three words when one will do?, he asks rhetorically (Ortayli in Drace-Francis, 1999:118). Stevan Pavlowitch, on the other hand, finds South East Europe geographically vague and notes that the Balkans, understood, however, as a neutral toponym, should not be imprudently sentenced to disuse (Pavlowitch, 2000). Other scholars, however, have pointed that the name itself is not a neologism and has been in use by German, Romanian and, to some extent, Anglo-American scholars at least since the late 1890s (Švob-Djokić, 2001; Drace-Francis, 1999). There is a potential debate looming on the horizon, but it is unlikely to alter the new political vocabulary.

The European component in the newly coined South East European identity, however, is a double-edged sword. The common orientation towards the EU has been instrumental for the advancement of regional cooperation, yet the race towards accession undermines any attempt to build robust multilateral institutions along regional lines. The heterogeneity of the links with the EU is a truly divisive factor as new South East Europe is composed of a EU member state (Greece), two candidates negotiating accession (Bulgaria, Romania), one not negotiating as yet (Turkey) and five potential candidates (Albania, Croatia, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro), only two of which have a Stabilisation and Association Agreement (Macedonia and Croatia). The EU's has put forward regional cooperation as a condition only for the Western Balkans, but not for Bulgaria and Romania (Anastasakis and Bechev, 2003). The front-runners Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia consistently advocate bilateral and trilateral arrangements focused on concrete projects as opposed to grand schemes short of regional organisation (Hinkova, 2003). Apprehensions that regional cooperation is an obstacle rather than a stepping stone to European integration have been there since 1996. As the most visible

cooperation initiative, the SP has been the common target of criticism because of its bureaucratic inflexibility, but also due to its unspecified relation vis-a-vis the process of EU enlargement. There is the fear that Pact-promoted regional integration is a hurdle for before the states eager and poised to join the EU as quick as possible. In new South East Europe, the thin identification with one another does not easily translate into group solidarity (Vucetic, 2001:128-129).

### **Conclusion**

The doubtful impact of the South Eastern European rhetoric on the regionalisation process brings back the major question of whether and how ideas could be linked to political outcomes. I argue that using the notion of common (negative) identity as an analytical tool allows us to answer several key puzzles. On one hand, it explains why it was possible to include all post-communist South East European countries, diverse as they were, in the Western-promoted schemes (SECI, Royaumont, later the SP). Actors like the EU ended up promoting regionalism while at the same time had already differentiated Romania and Bulgaria from 'the Western Balkans' by granting them associated status and promising membership in 1993. In the 1990s, South East Europe was perceived to be a security-interdependent region. Any meaningful reconstruction and reconciliation effort had to go beyond the Yugoslav context and be carried out on a multilateral basis involving all Balkan states. On the other hand, the focus on identity casts light on why the countries in South East Europe launched the SEECP, but failed to give it substance. Although the initiative did make a difference bringing more stability in Balkan interstate relations, its main role as a channel to project a new regional identity towards the West can be seen through the prism of the Balkan stigma and the threat of marginalisation in the 1990s. Finally, the 'the flight from the Balkans' behaviour, best illustrated by the excess of the Croatian constitution amendment of January 1998, can be understood from the viewpoint of identity politics.

If political identities are about drawing lines between ins and outs, self and other, it then becomes evident that South East Europe suffers from a built-in shortcoming. First, its

'other' is not to be found beyond any newly constructed spatial boundary, but is rather the region's own 'Balkan' past and present understood as fragmentation, instability and isolation from 'Europe.' Second, regional cooperation in South East Europe, in ideational terms, is really about undoing borders and inclusion in the enlarged EU and NATO and not about demarcating a new geopolitical unit. The success of schemes like the SEDM is largely a result of the close linkage with NATO and the direct US involvement, while the difficulties experienced by the SP are, among other things, related to its alleged irrelevance in terms of EU integration. Going back to Ortayli's remark, it is evident that the three words in the name South East Europe can ultimately be reduced to one.

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