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Constructing South East Europe: The Politics of Regional Identity in the Balkans

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CONSTRUCTING SOUTH EAST EUROPE: THE POLITICS OF REGIONAL IDENTITY IN THE BALKANS

DIMITAR BECHEV

Those who view the Mediterranean as an imaginary construct usually oppose it to the riparian subregions, including the Balkans. As a rule, subregions are historically and geographically more concrete compared to the fuzzy Mediterranean mosaic. This certainly will come as a surprise to the students of South East Europe who are accustomed to the axiom that the countries and societies inhabiting the area are so heterogenous that they lack a common identity transcending national borders. Common historical and cultural legacies may exist but they have difficulty in creating any sustainable identitarian bonds, as tragically demonstrated by the Yugoslav drama of the 1990s. This goes to say that political geography is not just about space but its interpretation and usage. The case of the Balkans illustrates the ways in which regional entities are articulated, instrumentalised and contested, a rather topical issue when it comes to the Mediterranean.

Prior to embarking on any discussion on identity one needs to think carefully about the concept itself. Very often, identity is understood as a cultural given: unchangeable and located outside time, space and social context. This is a familiar story when it comes to national identity but essentialist ideas and arguments are also projected beyond the nation. This move is very vividly exemplified by Samuel Huntington's depiction of international conflict and cooperation as derived from civilisational affiliations. By implication, to Huntington, it is religious and cultural homogeneity, rather than integrated markets, that makes a regional project successful.[1] There is no shortage of writings on Balkan cultural distinctiveness.[2] In most cases, these dwell on the idea that despite their fragmented identities, the inhabitants of the south-east corner of Europe share a set of common cultural traits. 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.[3] In a similar mode, early 20th century antropogeographers such as Jacques Ancel and Jovan Cvijić made much of the commonality of dress, architecture, ideas of space and time.[4] Cvijić even went a step further elaborating the notion of *homo balcanicus* defined by a particular Balkan *mentalité*. These views have more recently become the target of much criticism. Thus Pashcalis Kitromilides argues that Balkan *mentalité* could be observed only in specific historical contexts. To him, such a context the pre-national Balkan Orthodox oecumene of the 18th and early 19th centuries. Kitromilides contends that the advent of national particularisms have rendered this form of regional identity obsolete. The most fundamental problem with the Balkan anthropogeographic school is its inability to come to terms with the shifting identities and cultural contents. Conceptually, antropogeographers are not far from the 'ancient hatreds' reading of the Balans coming to the fore with the war in Bosnia.[5] If we believe in essential Balkanness, *homo balcanicus* and the persistence of *mentalités,* why not claim that these are the source of the Balkanites' deeply entrenched and irrational proneness to violence?[6] Treating regionnes as proceeding from a reservoir of cultural features is ultimately a dead-end street.

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[1] Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

[2] An overview in Wendy Bracewell and Alex Drace-Francis, 'South-Eastern Europe: History, Concept, Boundaries,' in Wendy Bracewell and Alex Drace-Francis (eds.), *South-Eastern Europe: History, Concept, Boundaries,* a special issue of *Balkanologie,* 3 (2), December 1999, pp. 54-6.

Fortunately, constructivist scholarship offers an antidote for the ills of essentialism. The view is most succinctly articulated by Iver Neumann according to whom 'regions are invented by political actors as a political programme, they are not simply waiting to be discovered'.[7] Thus constructivists avoid the reification of regional identity and treat it as an open-ended social project. In a similar vein, Charles King comments that:

> 'For well-established regions, just as for well-articulated national identities, the temptation is to read back into the past the settled parameters of the region itself, to see the existence of the region as analytically prior to the forms of

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[3] Trajan Stojanovich, *A Study in Balkan Civilisation*, New York: Knopf, 1967; Idem, *Balkan Worlds: The First and Last Europe,* Armonk, N.Y, London: Sharpe, 1994.

[4] Jacques Ancel, *Peuples et Nations des Balkans: Géographie Politique,* Paris: A. Colin, 1929; Jovan Cvijić, *La Peninsule Balkanique: Géographie Humaine*, Paris: A .Colin., 1918. On the antropogeographic school, see Andrei Pippidi, 'Changes of Emphasis: Greek Christendom, Westernisation, South-Eastern Europe, and neo-Mitteleuropa' in Wendy Bracewell and Alex Drace-Francis (eds.), *South-Eastern Europe: History, Concept, Boundaries (Dossier),* pp. 93-107.

[5] The two key texts representing the 'ancient hatreds' genre in the accounts of ethnic violence in South East Europe are Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: the Record of a Journey through Yugoslavia in 1937*, London: Macmillan, 1941, and Robert Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993. For a critical overview with a reference to the Bosnian case, see Noel Malcolm, *Bosnia: A Short History,* London: Macmillan, 1996, pp. xix-xxii.

[6] To quote one example, Stjepan Mještrović seeks the roots of the war in former Yugoslavia in the character of the Dinaric man, a notion introduced by Cvijić,. Stjepan Mještrović, *Habits of the Balkan Heart: Social Character and the Fall of Communism,* College Station Texas: A&M UP, 1993.

[7] Iver Neumann, 'Regionalism and Democratisation,' in Jan Zielonka and Alex Pravda (eds.), *Democratic Consolidation in Eastern Europe, Vol 2 International Dimensions,* Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2001, p. 58.

> political cooperation that emerge within its borders. As with the existence of nations, though, it is easy to forget that the delineations of the boundaries and characteristics of the regional unit emerge from an essentially political process: just as there were no nations before elites – cultural, political and economic – came to imagine them as such, so too are there no regions until one particular vision of the region's shape and features manages to outstrip rival definitions.'[8]

According to this conceptualisation, regions emerge as relatively malleable entities contingent on various social practices, including the interaction amongst elites and publics across state borders leading to the generation and accumulation of shared knowledge, meanings and values. The work on the transatlantic security community by Karl Deutsch and his associates in the 1950s and 1960s has made important contribution in charting this theoretical field.[9] It is not incidental that constructivists have taken aboard many of Deutsch's insights, regardless of their methodological differences. One can easily read those segments of the constructivist literature that explore the socialising effects of institutions on states, elites and domestic societies as a continuation of Deutsch's project.[10]

Another path, followed by scholars like Neumann or King, enquires into the construction of Others as a means of building up regional solidarity.[11] As with nations, othering goes hand-in-hand with the invention of common regional past to harden the discursive boundaries between Self and Other.[12] Thus the critics of essentialism are interested in the dynamics, rather than statics of identity. Instead of *identity* as such, they theorise about the politics of *socialisation* and *othering*, of constructing and maintaining the sense of cohesiveness and difference.

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[8] Charles King, 'The New Near East,' *Survival,* 43 (2), 2001, p. 57.

[9] Karl Deutsch et al. *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1957.

[10] Emmanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (eds.), *Security Communities*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.

[11] This approach is, in many ways, inspired by Frederik Barth's classical study of ethnic identity formation, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries,* Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1969.

[12] Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other: The East in European Identity Formation,* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. See also Iver B. Neumann and Jennifer M. Welsh, 'The Other in European Self-Definition: An Addendum to the Literature on International Society', *Review of International Studies,* 17 (4), 1991, pp. 327–48.

Looking from that perspective, it is not enough to ask *what* is regional identity and what are its spatial borders, but also *who* constructs it as well as *for whom* and *against whom* it is constructed. Until recently, the scholarship on the Balkans was exclusively dealing with the first group of questions and had relatively little to say on the second one. Historiography, more often originating from outside than from inside the region, has paid considerable attention to the parallel emergence of political and socio-economic institutions in countries of South East Europe. Its comparative methodology has cast much light on the common trends in the development of the local states and societies. Moving away from national parochialism, historians bring out regional *commonalities*. Rather than culture, comparativists see regional identity in terms of shared characterstics: belated and half-way modernisation, peripheral position vis-a-vis Western Europe, the ethnicisation of politics, the alienation between society and the state.[13]

Generally, historians look at the *longue durée*. This approach is reflected, for instance, in Nicloae Iorga's idea of 'Byzance après Byzance'.[14] For her part, Maria Todorova maintains that Balkan specificities are a product of the Ottoman era. Yet historians remain sensitive to processes of social change. Echoing Paschalis Kitromilides, however, Todorova reasons that, on the whole, this imperial legacy is becoming extinct and is gradually being washed away by the waves of modernity. 'Turkey-in-Europe' lingers on only marginal spheres such as cuisine and popular culture, which is distinctive from dominant westernised national cultures.[15] Todorova joins Alexandru Duţu's claim that the region can be taken as a meaningful whole only in view of the common set of problems related to modernisation as well as, speaking about the post-1989 period, political and socio-economic transition. The notion of an ever-present and uniform Balkan culture is swept aside.[16]

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[13] For a recent example of this approach, see Alina Mungiu Pippidi, 'The Balkans and Europe: A Bond with an Ambiguous Past,' Paper presented at the 'Public Opinion about the EU in Post-Communist Eastern Europe' conference, University of Indiana, Bloomington, 2-3 April 2004.

[14] Nicolae Iorga, *Le Caractére Commun des Institutions du Sud-est de l'Europe*, Paris, 1929, and *Byzance après Byzance: Continuation de l'Histoire de la Vie Byzantine*, Bucarest: L'institut d'études Byzantines, 1939.

[15] Paschalis Kitromilides, 'Balkan Mentality: History, Legend, Imagination,' *Nations and Nationalism,* 2 (2), 1996, pp. 163 – 91; Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans,* New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997, pp. 161-84.

[16] Alexandru Duţu, 'National and Regional Identity in Southeast Europe' in Güney Gőksu Őzdoğan and Kemali Saybaşili (eds.), *Balkans: A Mirror of the New World Order*, Istanbul: EREN, 1995. Maria Todorova, 'What Is or Is There a Balkan Culture, and Do or Should the Balkans Have a Regional Identity?,' *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies,* 4 (1), January 2004, pp. 175-86.

Some historians, however, put a special emphasis on discourse. The key claim put forward by Maria Todorova's seminal book *Imagining the Balkans* (1997)[17] is that representations of the Balkans' historical legacy, both inside and outside the region, matter as much as the historical legacy itself. Notions of essential Balkanness have been utilised to explain the violence in former Yugoslavia. Identity, therefore, is not reducible to objectively observed common cultural, social, political and economic features but boils down to *discourses* and *perceptions* on the latter. As Leeda Demetropoulou observes, the label 'Balkan' is, in the language of Saussurean semiotics, a signifier that has a complex -- and sometimes rather problematic -- relationship with the 'signified.'[18] What deserves consideration is the politics of *identification* with or *rejection* of that label or sign. The greatest accomplishment of *Imagining the Balkans,* in that sense, has been challenging historiography to engage with questions regarding the construction, enactment, contestation, utlisation as well as the constitutive effects of identity, drawing on social theory.

Todorova argues that in the late 19th and early 20th a negative image of the Balkans crystallised in the Western European consciousness, which was opposed to the self-congratulatory idea of enlightened 'Europeanness'. If Europe set the standard of civilisation and progress, the Balkans were a site of backwardness, perpetual strife, tribal warfare and resistance to modernisation. This clichéd image never faded away, despite all vicissitudes of the area's history. The entrenchment of terms such as balkanisation in the political vocabulary testifies to its power. The conflict in former Yugoslavia, commonly referred to as 'the war in the Balkans', or even as 'the Third Balkan War', certainly gave this idiom a new lease of life in the 1990s.[19] The conflict was seen as a mere repetition of earlier cycles of ethnic bloodshed. Importantly, this discourse named by Todorova 'Balkanism' was employed to justify different policies towards the Bosnian war and it served the proponents of non-intervention, fond of the 'ancient hatreds' explanation of the conflict. The 'Balkan' wars in former Yugoslavia also were also used to draw discursive boundaries between civilised Central Europe molded by its Austro-Hungarian legacies and the post-Ottoman lands in the south. Political elites in emerging Central Europe to project their closeness to 'Europe' in opposition to the imploding Balkans on the basis of its commitment to Western-style democracy, tolerance and liberal values.

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[17] Although John Allcock should be credited for his pioneering efforts, it was Todorova's work to launch a debate of major intellectual and political significance. John Allcock, 'Constructing the Balkans,' in John Allcock and Antonia Young (eds.), *Black Lambs and Grey Falcons, Women Travellers in the Balkans*, Bradford: Bradford UP, 1991, pp. 170-91. Other important contributions include Eli Skopetea, *I Dysi tis Anatolis: Eikones apo to telos tis othomanikis aytokratorias* [Orient's West: Last Images of the Othoman Empire], Athens: Gnosis, 1992; Vesna Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of Imagination,* London, New Haven: Yale UP, 1998; Dušan Bjelić and Obrad Savić (eds.), *Balkan as a Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation,* Cambridge Mass, MIT Press, 2002; Diana Mishkova, 'In the Mirror of Balkanism: Imagining Europe in the Nineteenth-Century Balkans,' research paper published by the Nexus project, Sofia, Centre for Advanced Studies, 2003; Andrew Hammond (ed.). *The Balkans and the West: Constructing the European Other, 1945-2003*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004.

[18] Leeda Demetropoulou, 'The Balkans-A Multi-dimensional Sign'. *Eurobalkans,* 36-37*,* Autumn-Winter 1999/2000.

[19] Cf. Pavlos Hadzopoulos, 'All That Is, That Is Nationalist: Western Imaginings of the Balkans since the Yugoslav Wars,' *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans,* 5 (1), 2003, pp. 25-38.

Todorova's analysis suggests that Europe and Europeanness are the key points of reference in the mental mapping of Balkan space and identity. As elsewhere on the post-communist fringes, identification with Europe has had a powerful legitimating and mobilising effect.[20] Building on the work of Edward Said, Milica Bakić-Hayden and Robert Hayden explore how nationalists across Yugoslavia claimed cultural superiority over orientalised 'Balkan' Others -- be it Byzantine-Orthodox Serbs or Muslim Bosnians and Kosovars -- raising the banner of their own imputed 'Europeanness' and 'Westernness'.[21] In contrast to those authors, Todorova argues that the relationship between the signifiers 'Balkans' and 'Europe' is more complex than the one between Said's Orient and the West. Located geographically inside but politically outside what is thought as Europe, it is the Balkans' irrationality and unique proneness to violence that make them thoroughly un-European. The Balkans are placed both inside and outside Europe, a sort of twilight zone on the margins of the continent. While Hayden and Bakić-Hayden portray the Balkans as Europe's Other, Todorova insists on the impossibility of a fully-fledged binary relationship similar the one between Saidian Occident and Orient. However blurred their boundaries, the Balkans remain geographically more specific than the fluid Orient. Finally, the Balkans lack the latter's exotic appeal to Western imagination. On the contrary, the Balkans are very much Europe's Self as Europe casually externalises all about its past that it wishes to forget -- genocide, ethnic cleansing, intolerance -- into the caricatured image of the Balkans.[22]

What does all that tell us about regionalism in South East Europe? From a theoretical point of view, the Balkanism debate posits Balkan regional identity as a *sui generis* intersubjective structure established around the notions of Europeanness and Westerness. Balkan identity is conceived in markedly negative terms, that is as semi- or even non-Europeanness, while Europe is imagined by the Balkanites as an ideal, yet unattainable, Self. All their differences aside, the states and societies in the Balkans share the stigma of not matching the standard of Europeanness despite their claims of belonging to Europe on the grounds of geography, history or culture. This worldview is reproduced by both external but also by internal actors who are co-opted and indeed shaped by the Balkanist discourse in a sort of Gramsci-*esque* way, Todorova explores in great detail the ways the national discourses in wider South East Europe -- and not just in former Yugoslavia like Hayden and Bakić-Hayden do -- either accept the stigma of being 'Balkan' or project it onto their neighbours in order to assert their own 'European' superiority. [23] Beyond her critique of Balkan 'othering', what makes Todorova relevant to the study of interstate relations is the argument that negative Balkan identity is embedded in the elite and popular discourses across South East Europe. She points at how these societies rationalise their and their neighbours' peripherality vis-à-vis imaginary Europe as well as how the external actors involved in this identity dynamic forge and communicate particular shared identities inside the region. Borrowing from Todorova, the next sections focus on the internal and external constructions of regional and European identity.

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[20] Consider, for example, the case of the Ukrainian nationalist discourse of belonging to the West/Europe and therefore sharing a different identity from 'Asiatic' and 'Eastern' Russia. See Taras Kurzio, 'Nationalism in Ukraine: Towards a New Theoretical and Comparative Framework,' in *Journal of Political Ideologies,* 7 (2), 2002, pp. 133-61.

[21] Edward Said, *Orientalism,* New York: Vintage Books, 1979; Milica Bakić-Hayden and Robert Hayden, 'Orientalist Variations on the Theme 'Balkans': Symbolic Geography in Recent Yugoslav Cultural Politics,' *Slavic Review,* 51 (1), 1992, pp. 1-15; Milica Bakić-Hayden, 'Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugolsavia,' *Slavic Review,* 54 (4), 1995, pp. 917-31.

[22] Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans,* pp. 17-8; Mazower, *The Balkans,* pp. 5-11.

The inside perspective: the nation, Europe and the Balkans

The articulations of Balkan regional identity 'from within' and self-perceptions vary from one society to another and across time, but nevertheless one can identify the same basic triple structure of nation, regional community, and macro-region (Europe), all three often seen in markedly culturalist terms.[24] The first and the third pole are taken for granted, while the second one (Balkans) remains vaguely defined and elusive. More often than not, it tends to be subsumed by or inscribed in the other two foci of identity: the nation and Europe. In other words, a country's Balkan identity is a function of how it positions its national self vis-à-vis Europe and the West.

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[23] Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, Ch 2. A good illustration of this dynamic is contemporary Bulgarian historian Ivan Ilchev's description of how competing claims of belonging to the European civilisation were raised at the time of the two Balkan wars in 1912-13,' During the [1912] Balkan War, the [Bulgarian] Ministry of Foreign and Religious Affairs instructed its representatives abroad to propagate the claim that the Balkan peoples, the Bulgarians in particular, were fighting for the cause of 'European culture'. The Serbs emphasised that without their culture the European one would not be the same. The Romanians were especially keen to persuade the Westerners that Romanian culture purportedly stood much closer to the West than to the East."Romania is neither Turkey nor Bulgaria … She is, more clearly, a sentinel of the Western civilisation." In a similar vein, Athens tried to equate the Ancient Greek culture, which formed contemporary Europe's civilisation, with modern Hellenic and European culture. Ivan Ilchev, 'Hlopaneto na vratata na Evropa kato balkanski sindrom [Knocking on Europe's Door as a Balkan Syndrom]," *Sega Daily*, 18 November 2000.

[24] See Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans,* Ch. 2 'Balkans as Self-Designation'.

Thus Greek elites have eagerly asserting their nation's contribution to European civilisation.[25] The rediscovery of ancient Hellenic heritage by the 19th century Greeks, exemplified by the phenomena as diverse as the adoption of a new national name *Ἕλληνες* (Hellenes) or the architectural taste of the urban classes, sought to highlight the symbolic link of the young nation-state with Western European culture inspired by the classical legacy.[26] At the same time, this westward orientation has not been linked with attempts to draw discursive borders towards the rest of South East Europe. On the contrary, modern Greek elites -- both in the early 19th century and the post-Cold War era -- have had little doubts as to Greece's leading role in its immediate neighbourhood, often as a channel of Western (European) influences. Maria Todorova praises Greek openness towards the Balkans.[27] However, she plays down the Greek perception of ethnic difference intertwined with the notion of 'the threat from the north' related to dominant security discourse from the interwar period up until the 1960s and, more recently, to illegal immigration from the former communist bloc.[28] That said, the defining Other in the Greek case has undoubtedly been Turkey and the Ottomans seen as the epitome of the alien and threatening Orient. At the same time, one should not ignore alternative constructions of Greek national identity as opposed to the interventionist West, be it the Great Powers of olden days or US hegemony at present. The latter have often nurtured an appeal for a return to the country's Orthodox roots and, despite its nationalistic pathos, for linking Greece more closely with parts of the former Byzantine oecumene.[29]

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[25] Paschalis Kitromilides, 'Europe and the Dilemmas of Greek Consciousness,' in Philip Carabott (ed.), *Greece and Europe in a Comparative Perspective,* London: Centre for Hellenic Studies, King's College, 1995, pp. 1-20.

[26] Here the key point of reference is the work of the 19th century founding father of Greek national historiography Constantinos Paparrigopoulos devoted to tracing the continuity between Ancient and Modern Greece. *Istoria tou Ellinikou ethnous: apo ton archaiotaton chronon mehri kath'emas* [History of the Greek Nation: From Ancient Times to the Present], 6 vols, Athens: n.p., 1925 (originally published in 1860-74).

[27] *Imagining the Balkans,* Ch. 2.

[28] On the identity interactions between Greece and its northern neighbours through history, see Dimitris Tziovas (ed.), *Greece and the Balkans: Identities, Perceptions and Cultural Encounters since the Enlightenment,* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003.

[29] For a general discussion of Greek identity politics, see Renée Hirschon, 'Identity and the Greek State: Some Conceptual Issues and Paradoxes' in Richard Clogg (ed.), *The Greek Diaspora in the Twentieth Century,* New York St Martin's Press, 1999, pp. 158-81, and John Koliopoulos and Thanos Veremis, *Greece. The Modern Sequel,* London: Hurst, 2002, pp. 227-63.

In a very similar way, Albanian national narratives underline the country's historical embeddedness in the Balkans, but also assert the 'natural' connection with Europe. A clear indication is the myth of Skenderbeg as a last protector of Europe from the invading Ottoman hordes. Like their colleagues around the Balkans, Albanian historians have invariably portrayed the Ottoman conquest as a crucial turning point in the nation's history. In their view, it severed the link with Europe and deprived the Albanians from their rightful place.[30] The so-called national revival period (*Rilinja*) at the turn of the 19 and 20th century, ending with the attainment of independent statehood, is interpreted as a drive to remedy this historical injustice.[31] As in the case of Greek, Bulgarian, Serb and Romanian national narratives, the struggle against Ottoman domination is interpreted as a contribution to the cause of European civilisation in its march against Asiatic backwardness, decay and fanaticism. Coming out from the Stalinist Hoxha regime in the 1990s, Albania readily embraced the 'return to the West' discourse, which drew its inspiration from the national master narrative. The post-Cold War era marked another stage in the restoration of cultural and political links with Europe and the West. This move, however, has rarely been accompanied with symbolic rejection of some imaginary Balkanness and/or its externalisation onto the other societies in South East Europe.[32]

Constructions of Romanian national identity have traditionally overemphasised the country's linguistic and cultural uniqueness. Intellectuals and politicians have been stressing their nation's character of a Latin island within the sea of barbaric Slavs and Magyars, though some of them like Nicolae Iorga invested much intellectual energy in the study of the Romanians' historical links with their southern neighbours in an area they called South East Europe, rather than Balkans. The Latin connection reigned supreme prior to the communist period. Many members of the pre-1945 intellectual and political elites received their education in France, while Bucharest was commonly known, at least in the Balkans, as 'Little Paris.'[33] Later, the peculiar brand of nationalism espoused by Ceauşescu shifted the attention to the nation's indigenous Dacian roots, partly playing down its Roman pedigree. The regime's ideology made much of Romania's unique past, which in turn legitimised its pro-independence foreign policy in the context of the Soviet bloc. This vision was in tune with an intellectual discourse of the interwar years defining Romania as a no-man's land at the crossroads of the West and the East.

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[30] Artan Puto, 'The Perception of the Ottoman Period in Albanian Historiography of the Socialist Period as Symbolic Representation of the "Other",' paper presented at the *Nationalism, Society and Culture in post-Ottoman South East Europe* conference. Oxford, 29-30 May 2004. For an in-depth examination at Albanian identity, see Stefanie Schwandner-Sievers and Bernd Fischer (ed.), *Albanian Identities: Myth and History,* London: Hurst, 2002.

[31] These themes are central in the Bulgarian national narrative too. There are striking parallels between the Bulgarian and Albanian case as far as the concept of a National Revival period is concerned.

[32] Maria Todorova notes this, although she is also able to find out examples to the contrary. *Imagining the Balkans,* pp. 45-6.

[33] For an interesting analysis of how 19th century Romanian liberal leaders instrumentalised the myths of European belonging, see Diana Mishkova, 'The Uses of Tradition and National Identity in the Balkans' in Maria Todorova (ed.), *Balkan Identities. Nation and Memory*, London: Hurst, 2004, pp. 269-94.

Despite all those turnarounds in Romanian identity politics, belonging to the Balkans could never come to the fore. On the contrary, the notion of the Balkans has remained loaded with pejorative connotations. Thus, the inhabitants of Transylvania and Banat, once part of the Habsburg monarchy, would blame their ills on the centralised rule by 'Balkan' Bucharest. Romania supplies some of the best evidence for Todorova's claims about the internalisation of the Balkan stigma. This pattern of identifying closely with Western Europe and keeping a symbolic distance from the neighbourhood had implications at the level of foreign policy too. In the mid-1990s, the Romanian diplomat and policy analyst Elena Zamfirescu published a piece reflecting on the desire of South East European states, Romania included, to become part of newly-emerging Central Europe and thus extricate themselves from the Balkan quagmire.[34] The reference to Balkanness has also been casually used by the Romanian media in discussing the relative advantages of their country in the beauty competition with Bulgaria on the way to the EU.

Unlike its north-western neighbours, Turkey's relationship with the Balkans has never been a matter of great political significance. Turkish nostalgy for the lands of *Rumeli* is overshadowed by the endless debates whether and why the country is part of Europe or the Middle East. Turkey, nonetheless, is an ideal-type case that illustrates the ideological power of the European construct on all societies on its periphery. Though fuelled by an anti-colonial and pro-independence rhetoric, Atatürk's secularisation and Westernisation reforms turned upside-down domestic society in the name of emulating the nation-state in Western Europe, a trend already apparent in the Tanzimat reforms of the 19th century. As a result, Turkish state discourse has been anchored in the paradigm linking modernization,

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[34] Elena Zamfirescu, 'The Flight from the Balkans' in Armand Clesse and Adam Daniel Rotfeld (eds.), *Sources and Areas of Future Possible Crises in Europe*, Luxembourg: LIEIS, 1995, pp. 111-23. Also Tom Gallagher, 'To Be or Not to Be Balkan?: Romania's Quest for Self-Definition,' *Daedalus* 126 (3), 1997. On the various Romanian self-images and historical narratives, see Lucian Boia, *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness,* Budapest and New York: CEU Press, 2001.

Westernisation and Europeanisation prevalent in Eastern Europe, notably the countries populating erstwhile Turkey-in-Europe.

Former Yugoslavia's anxieties about its Balkanness came into the spotlight with the outbreak of violent conflict in the early 1990s. Until that moment, the country perceived itself, and indeed was perceived by the outwide world, as the most westernised and liberal part of Eastern Europe. Its citizens enjoyed the benefits of a self-managing economy and access to the West. President Tito and the Yugoslav communist leadership, moreover, claimed a role in global politics by founding and actively participating in the Non-aligned Nations Movement. South East Europe was one amongst many foreign policy arenas. While the self-designation Balkan was widely used in scholarly circles this did no relate to any strong identification with neighbouring states and societies, particularly those belonging to the Soviet bloc.

It was in the late 1980s and early 1990s that the Balkan theme entered fully the political discourse. The stereotypical image of Balkan otherness was instrumentalised most blatantly by various nationalist actors. Pro-independence politicians in Slovenia and Croatia justified their cause with the popular desire to break away from the Balkan political traditions of Yugoslavia and Serbia and return to Europe.[35] The former border between the Habsburg lands and the Ottoman Empire was recast, Huntington-style, as the boundary of European civilisation -- as well as of the contemporary European political community -- in which Croats and Slovenians claimed a place.[36] Ironically, one of the chief protagonists in the 'Third Balkan War', President Franjo Tudjman was amongst the most ardent proponents of severing all symbolic and material ties with 'the Balkans.' A professional historian, he viewed Croatia's past in the Yugoslav state as subjugation by 'Byzantine' Serbia and separation from its (Central) European cultural roots and traditions.[37] Only in the post-Tudjman era did the Zagreb government adopt a more neutral stance on this very politicised issue conceding that

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[35] As early as 1989-90, Slovenian communists rallied under the slogan 'Evropa zdaj!' (Europe now!). More in Nicole Lindstrom, 'Between Europe and the Balkans: Mapping Slovenia and Croatia's ``Return to Europe'' in the 1990s,' *Dialectical Anthropology,* 27 (3-4), 2003, pp. 313-29. Also Nicole Lindstrom and Maple Razsa, 'Reimagining the Balkans. The Role of Balkanism in the Construction of Croatian National Identity,' Paper presented at the Kokkalis Graduate Workshop, Harvard, 12 February 1999.

[36] An early 1990s graffito in Ljubljana put the idea of parting with Balkan past and heading towards *Mitteleuropa* very bluntly: 'Burek? Nein danke!'. Burek, a word of Turkish origin (bőrek), is a type of pastry common across the Balkans.

[37] Despite his portrayal of Croatia as Europe's bulwark against Eastern barbarism, Tudjman's conservative nationalism fuelled his deep distrust of the united Europe as a model of integration and supranational governance.

Croatia is a Mediterranean, Central European and South East European (but not Balkan!) state at the same time.[38] As we will see in the following chapters, the politicisation of regional identity had implications for the Croatian policy towards the Balkans.

Serbian nationalism, too, justified the conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia with references to the civilisational theories and the East-vs-West dichotomy. Serbdom was portrayed as inhabiting an imaginary Orthodox world opposed to the expansionist West represented by either the US or Germany and the Vatican, the alleged foreign patrons of the Catholic Croats. There was a burgeoning literature in the 1990s which drew bold designs for a union of Orthodox Balkan nations to resist foreign domination, an imputed Serb virtue. At the same time, the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina was justified with the resurgence of Muslim fundamentalism. In the final analysis, both Serbia and Croatia defended the Western civilisation from its big Other.[39] At the same time, the anti-Western vision of Serbia's identity was consistently challenged by the democratic opposition which embraced fully the 'return to Europe' discourse of post-communist Eastern Europe.[40]

All across former Yugoslavia, Balkan identity came to be equated with the gradual loss of status. The post-Tito era saw the slippage into social and economic crisis, disintegration and eventually fratricidal bloodshed. Yugoslavia and its successors, bar Slovenia, did not enjoy the privileged position that they had in Cold War Europe. The wars nurtured the sense of being abandoned -- or, according to some, backstabbed -- by the West.

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[38] The desire to establish a symbolic distance to the Balkans is reflected even in the work of Western authors. Titles such as *Croatia: Between the Balkans and Europe* (Will Bartlett, London: Routeledge, 2003) provide an excellent illustration of how salient the issue of regional belonging has been in Croatian identity politics.

[39] Croat and Serb nationalisms differed little in that respect. In the words of a shrewd commentator, 'Belgrade and Zagreb propaganda […] instantly claimed that once again Islam was threatening Christianity. Christianity and Europe needed to be defended against the new agressors. Croatian propagandists declared that for centuries their country had been the *Antemurale Christianitatis*, 'the bulwark of Christianity.' Serb propagandists claimed that their people had defended Europe from a Turkish invasion at the Battle of Kosovo on 28 June 1389, three days after which the bells of Notre Dame in Paris had rung to celebrate the Christian victory. As usual the supine consumers of the propaganda did not question these assertions.' Vidosav Stevanović, *Milošević: The People's Tyrant*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003, p. 80.

[40] Hence the notion of two Serbias -- a traditionalist and nationalistic one, associated mainly, but not exclusively, with the Milošević regime, and a liberal and 'European' one --emerging in the political discourse of the 1990s. See Slobodan Naumović, 'National Identity Splits, Deep Rooted Conflicts and (Non)Funcitoning States: Understanding the Intended and Unintended Consequences of the Clash between the "Two Serbias"' research paper published by the Nexus project, Sofia, Center for Advanced Studies, 2003.

Becoming Balkan signified moving away from 'Europe' as the former communist countries were gradually achieving what Yugoslavia had possessed and lost.[41]

As noted by Todorova, Bulgaria is perhaps the only case where the adjective Balkan has both positive and negative connotations. 'Among the Balkan nations, the Bulgarians share in all the frustrations of being Balkan, and yet they are the only ones who seriously consider their Balkanness, probably because of the fact that the Balkan range lies entirely on their territory'.[42] Bulgarian language, however, clearly distinguishes the Balkan range ('Балкан', in singular) -- *the* defining landmark in the nation's symbolic geography -- and the Balkans ('Балкани', always in plural). While the discourse on Bulgarian national identity has never questioned the country's historical and geographical place within the latter, the idea about 'Balkan mentality' as an obstacle on the path to full-fledged membership in the club of European states and societies is well-entrenched.[43] As their neighbours, Bulgarians insist on their European identity but also locate Europe beyond the imaginary borders of the Balkans. If for a Britton 'going to Europe' means crossing the Channel, a Bulgarian goes to Europe when his or her destination is past Vienna.[44]

What is common to all above contexts -- with the notable exception of Turkey -- is the Balkan label's centrality in the discourses on national identity. Whether begrudgingly accepting it or passionately externalising it, local elites have had to confront and handle the stigma of Balkanness. However identity constructions vary from one case to another, this stigma emerges a key *locus communus*. While the meaning of Balkan may changes through time and space, there is also a nucleus of content that reappears, across space and time, and this is the theme marginality vis-à-vis Europe and the West.

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[41] See Slavenka Drakulić, *Balkan Express: Fragments from the Other Side of War,* London: Hutchinson, 1993. Other studies of the usage of the Balkans in the post-Yugoslav context include Laura Sakaja, 'Stereotypes of the Balkans of Young People in Zagreb: A Contribution to the Study of Imaginative Geography,' *Revija za socijologiju*_1-2, 2001, pp. 27-37, Kristina Balaloska, 'Between "the Balkans" and "Europe": A study of the Contemporary Transformation of Macedonian Identity, 1991-2002,' *New Balkan Politics,* 2 (6), 2002.

[42] Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans,* p. 54.

[43] For an interesting sociological analysis on these perceptions in Bulgarian history teachers, see Nina Nikolova, Svetlana Sabeva, Milena Yakimova, 'Europe and Its Shadow,' *Eurozine,* 30 January 2002. <http://www.eurozine.com/article/2002-01-30-nikolova-en.html> Accessed 12 October 2004.

[44] On the Bulgarian case, see Roumen Daskalov, 'Images of Europe: A Glance from the Periphery' , EUI Working Paper SPS 94/8, European University Institute, Florence, 1994.

Thanks to this structural relationship of marginality, the notion of Europe and its derivatives have acquired a particular meaning. Throughout the Balkans, they denote social, political and economic advancement associated with modernity and, therefore, laden with powerful symbolism.[45] Indeed Europeanness has been an elusive ideal to which the societies in question have aspired for the last two centuries or so. Europe has also presented itself as a model of Western modernity. As William Wallce puts it,

> 'Nineteenth-century Europe *was* the West. The most "modern" states and economies, and the most "advanced" cultures in the world, were to be found in Great Britain, France and Germany. The empires of Eastern Europe were its periphery: accepted as European in the culture of their capitals, but (accurately) seen by the West as less advanced and less stable'[46]

Replace 'empires of Eastern Europe' with Balkan (or Eastern European, for that matter) nation-states and the depiction is still valid. The continual wholesale import of political, social and economic institutions and cultural idioms from Western Europe testifies to the longevity and power of a centre-periphery relationship. To the extent that the forging of national identities has also been part of the modernisation process, national homogenisation, deplored by the Western observers of the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, has been intimately linked with Europeanisation. This accounts for the seemingly paradoxical fact that notions of belonging to Europe are so tightly interwoven into the texture of national identities, otherwise based on myths of uniqueness, self-sufficiency and purity.

What is also remarkable is the perseverance of the 19th century image of Europe as the beacon of progress and civilisation in the Balkan periphery. As in the classical era of nation-building, in the post-Cold War period, enlightened Europe emerged again as model and benchmark for South East European societies' development. What is largely absent from the selective construction of Europe are quintessential European experiences like colonialism, nationalism, war, the dominance of totalitarian ideologies and the Holocaust. Balkan identity politics has been defined by an Europeanisation discourse centred on the post-World War II history of peace, political integration and economic prosperity in the West.

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[45] For a discussion how Europeanisation discourses were constructed and employed by 19th century Romanian and Serbian political elites, see Diana Mishkova 'The Uses of Tradition.'

[46] William Wallace, 'Where Does Europe End?: Dilemmas of Inclusion and Exclusion' in Jan Zielonka (ed.), *Europe Unbound. Enlarging and Reshaping the Boundaries of the European Union,,* London: Routledge, 2002, p. 87. On the idea of Europe through time, see Anthony Pagden (ed.), *The Idea of Europe: From Antiquity to the European Union,* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.

While the notions of essential Balkan irrationality and backwardness may be contested, marginality vis-à-vis Europe and the West lies at the heart of the region's discourse about itself. Marginality, in that sense, remains the common denominator in the collective Balkan identity, however thin and fluid the latter may be. Vesna Goldsworthy points at two interesting examples of how politicians in different countries have tried to tackle discursively this predicament. During the 1997 election campaign, Croatian president Franjo Tudjman made his slogan 'Tudjman, not the Balkans.' In the wake of the 1999 Kosovo war, the Bulgarian President Petar Stoyanov asserted in a speech that the Yugoslav president Slobodan Milošević is 'not dividing Europe from the Balkans but Europe from Europe.'[47] The above piece of anecdotal evidence also suggests that state leaders from the region reckon mental maps as a significant political problem. Some of them like Tudjman or the Slovenian leadership of the early 1990s have attempted to exploit the mobilisation potential of the Balkan-Europe dichotomy. Others like President Stoyanov have aimed to assert their Europeanness without actually undoing the discursive borders by questioning the meaning of Europe and the Balkans.

The outside perspective: between othering and Europeanisation

Though they help us to grasp better regional identity, national self-images or the elite discourses give us only part of the picture. Local agents may reproduce and enact collective identities but, as the literature on Balkanism insists, the latter are often shaped and transmitted into South East Europe from the outside. As the external gaze to the region is critical, it is important to inquire into the dynamics of identity construction from the outside. However, there has not been a single dominant external discourse on the Balkans. At different times, the Balkans were variably interpreted as an essential Other or as a potential future part of the European/Western Self.

Given that the West itself is a construction much more vivid in the imagination of outsiders than for those who are supposed to stand for it, it is questionable whether a uniform discourse of Balkans otherness sustainable. Much of the analytical work on the external perspectives towards Balkan identities is closely linked with the Yugoslav conflicts of the 1990s. However, the essentialist perspective exemplified by the bulk of Western journalistic writings on the Bosnian war was followed by a second wave of authors-- usually historians or experts on the region of the pre-1990s days. A prominent figure amongst them, James Gow has even questioned the term Balkans as 'obfuscatory, indeterminate, contested, counterproductive and even harmful.'[48] As a whole, the literature has challenged the myths of Balkan otherness stressing the region's embeddedness in European history. [49] But why is it that different agents in the 'West' construct the Balkans differently at different junctures? The Bulgarian political analyst Ivan Krastev has posed the question of whether Todorova's discourse of Balkanism, in its pure form, is not ultimately a media construct of the 1990s, rather than a fixed image in the Western consciousness.[50] External discourses may well be contextual and time-contingent. One illustration is the shifting discourse on the region closely linked with its changing international and domestic politics. If in the 1990s it was customary to talk about the Balkans as a historical battlefield on the margins of Europe where ethnic and religious groups settled their scores, the 2000s was peppered by standard phrases like 'European vocation' and 'European future.'

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[47] Vesna Golsdworthy, 'Invention and In(ter)vention: The Rhetoric of Balkanisation' in Bjelić and Savić (eds.), *Balkan as Metaphor,* pp. 25-39.

Even so, some continuities are arguably there. One is that Balkans or South East Europe -- in most cases excluding Greece and Turkey -- are casually seen from the outside as a single regional grouping. On the whole, Western perceptions have posited post-communist South East Europe as relatively more homogenous collection of states and societies than the locals would be inclined to believe. Although the awareness of heterogeneity gained ground over time -- often fueled by the uneven progress towards the coveted EU and NATO membership -- there has been a search of common themes and patterns. In the 1990s, common denominators included 'ancient hatreds', the constant threat of nationalist conflict, both within and amongst states, or the power of historical animosities. In the following decade, the Balkans have been viewed through the prism of shared problems stemming from the condition of weak statehood and the vulnerability of their domestic political and economic systems.[51] While institutional links between the countries of the region and the EU and NATO were becoming more diversified, external policymakers and analysts did not lose sight of certain common problems requiring regional approaches.

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[48] James Gow, 'A Region of Eternal Conflict? The Balkans-Semantics and Security' in William Park and G. Wyn Rees (eds.), *Rethinking Security in Post-Cold War Europe*, London and New York: Longman, 1998, p. 158.

[49] See in particular Misha Glenny, *The Balkans* (1999); Mark Mazower, *The Balkans* (2001); and Noel Malcolm, *Bosnia: A Short History* (1996).

[50] Remark made at the NEXUS Conference *The Balkans and Globalisation*, Central European University, Budapest, 4-6 June 2004.

By treating South East Europe as a group, though one with unclear borders, Western actors were still confronted by a series of identity-related questions. Did the countries which they referred to as the Balkans qualified to be part of their collective 'Us' (the West, the EU, Europe)? Were they Europe's 'Other' or just one amongst many others? Are they rather an ambiguous semi-Other as Todorova believes? If they were such a semi-Other, should they be gradually transformed them into part of the symbolic 'Us' or one had to build up walls -- both discursive and material -- to separate 'Us' and 'Them'? There can be many answers to those questions and, therefore, many external narratives on how 'Europe' and the Balkans relate to each other in the eyes of the former. However, granted that there are multiplicity of discourses, as claimed by Leeda Demetropoulou and (implicitly) Ivan Krastev, one has to decides which of them matter, how, and for what reasons.

To answer this question, one has to look at discourses embedded into institutions that have direct and undisputed impact on macro processes of identity formation. The central one is clearly the EU, which in the latter part of the 20th century has become, by and large synonymous, with Europe. In doing so, it appropriated the symbolic capital associated with the notion of Europeanness, a common currency in the identity politics on the European periphery.[52] Moreover, the EU *defined* the standards of Europeanness and Westernness. Alongside other actors such as NATO, OSCE and the Council of Europe, the EU has projected a set of social norms framed as membership conditions towards Eastern Europe. Finally, the EU possesses the power to bundle states outside its borders in regional and subregional groupings through its institutional practices, which bears on the identity politics and symbolic geography of the Balkans as well as of other peripheral regions.

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[51] On the notion of weak states, see Centre for Policy Studies, Central European University, *In Search of Responsive Government. State Building and Economic Growth in the Balkans*, Budapest: Centre for Policy Studies, CEU, 2003, pp. 34-52.

[52] For an interesting discussion of this phenomenon, see Gergana Dimitrova, 'The Limits of Europeanisation,. Hegemony and Its Misuse in the Political Field of Bulgaria,' *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies,* 2 (2), 2002, pp. 69-93.

How has, therefore, the EU, the institutional flag-bearer of Europeanness, constructed the Balkans over time? Has it engaged in othering or, on the contrary, in treating the Balkans as a part of its in-group or collective Self? The question rests of a series of assumptions which are themselves contestable. To start with, it is a matter of controversy whether the EU/Europe has or could have a defined geopolitical Other. Ole Weaver claims that what one sees on the borders of Europe are societies that are best characterised as 'less-Europe', rather than as 'anti-Europe'.[53] Those peripheral actors are not seen as ontologically opposed and, therefore, constitutive of Europe as such but as being both same and different. In the words of Timothy Garton Ash, Europe does not have a boundary but it gradually dissolves as one goes eastwards, the only undisputable Other being Europe's own conflict-ridden past.[54] Europe's ambiguity about its own identity has resulted in ambiguity as to the strategic aims and territorial scope of its eastwards enlargement.[55] This line of thinking is in many ways congenial with Todorova's claim about the Balkans' in-betweenness, but where does in-betweenness stand in the inclusion-exclusion dichotomy?

From the mid-1990s into the early 2000s, the EU pursued a policy of cautious and gradual inclusion. Overall, the Balkans -- especially the post-communist states in the region as Turkey's EU bid was more ambiguous and Greece had been a member since 1981 -- were inserted, step by step, into a similar identity-formation dynamic as the rest of the EU's neighbours in the former socialist East. This was achieved through various institutional channels and mechanisms: the EU enlargement process for Bulgaria and Romania and the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) for the states of the Western Balkans. The inclusion of Bulgaria and Romania in the group of accession candidates in the 1990s and the political declarations made during the Feira (2000) and Thessaloniki (2003) Summits to the effect that the Western Balkans were potential members testified that the states in question were seen as part of the EU's in-group. While the price of inclusion was commitment to political and economic reform, the Balkan states had to demonstrate their adherence to the EU's deeper constitutive norms. Apart from the policy of carrots and sticks inducing compliance through the extension or holdback of benefits, the EU engaged all through the enlargement process in various practices of socialisation through sharing its values and principles. The EU itself projected its norms onto the eastern aspirants. The standards of 'normalcy' in domestic arrangements and external relations corresponded to the core EU values spelled out in the enlargement process.

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[53] Ole Waever, 'Insecurity, Security, and Asecurity in the West European Non-war Community', in Emmanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (eds.), *Security Communities,* pp. 69–118.

[54] Garton Ash, *Free World.* Cf. Bahar Rumelili, 'Constructing Identity and Relating to Difference: Understanding the EU's Mode of Differentiation,' *Review of International Studies,* 30 (1), January 2004, p. 33. For the debate about Europe's Others, see Neumann and Welsh, 'The Other in European Self-Definition'; Lars-Erik Cederman (ed.), *Constructing Europe's Identity: The External Dimension,* Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001.

[55] Jan Zielonka, 'Policy without Strategy: The EU's Record in Eastern Europe,' EUI Working Paper RSC 97/72, Robert Schumann Centre, European University Institute, 1997, pp. 6-9. Also *Explaining Euro-Paralysis. Why Europe is Unable to Act in International Politics,* London: Macmillan, pp. 72-5.

The EU norms have been especially salient in South East Europe. While in the latter part of the 1990s, the post-communist Balkan states were gradually drawn in the Europeanisation process, they also differed from the Central European and Baltic frontrunners. Due to the greater gap between the EU standards and the perceived level of compliance, the former were articulated much more powerfully in relation to South East Europe than elsewhere. This was the case of the economic criterion but above all of the conditions focused on democratic governance, minority rights, and peaceful foreign relations. Given that a number of the local states had recently waged war against one another, while others were still divided by nationalist disputes, the 'normalisation' of interstate politics in the region was also of great significance for the EU and the other international actors involved in the maintenance of peace and post-conflict reconstruction.

The EU also has the symbolical power to reshape political geography. Apart from the term South East Europe denoting the whole of the region it crafted, after 1999, the term Western Balkans. The Western Balkans emerged as a distinct group only after 1999 when Bulgaria and Romania were allowed to open membership talks with the EU.[56] Through its institutional arrangements and practices, the EU effectively repackaged the countries of the region into a several distinctive groupings. In the case of the Western Balkans, the common denominator was precisely the containment of conflict and the greater weakness of state institutions compared to the candidate countries. The EU's strategy was aimed at curbing the influence nationalist politics, promoting reconciliation, cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia, and, crucially, far-reaching integration schemes. Thus the projection of a specific set of norms to this geographically contiguous group of states reinforced the latter's status of a region. Not only did the Europeanisation process set the normative targets for the Balkan states but it also produced new geopolitical labels based on the level of convergence. The EU institutionalised the term Western Balkans to denote the countries included in its SAP. By implication, Romania and Bulgaria could be classified as Eastern Balkans, but this label was absent from the EU's vocabulary. Instead, the two countries were considered part of Central and Eastern Europe defined by the EU enlargement, though they did not qualify for the big-bang accession in 2004. The EU practice of naming hinted at the impossibility to use the Balkan label in a value-neutral way.

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[56] The term 'Western Balkans' was introduced by the Austrian Presidency of the EU in the 1998.

While labeling the region's more problematic parts 'Western Balkans', countries considered closer to meeting the EU standards were spared the B-word evoking images of marginality. When referring to the Western Balkans together with Bulgaria and Romania, the EU routinely speaks of South East Europe. In the EU discourse, Greece and Turkey rarely figure in the new South East Europe or Balkans understood mainly as the collection of post-communist countries in the area. This was striking given both states' geographical location, history and, most importantly, participation in numerous multilateral schemes at the Balkan level. In the final analysis, the different institutional relationships with the EU disqualified Greece and Turkey from being included in the core version of South East Europe. The EU exerts symbolic power not only over the notion of Europeanness and its normative contents but also shaped through its institutional practices of controlled inclusion the collective politico-geographical identities of the states in South East Europe after the late 1990s.

Conclusion

If the Balkans as a geohistorical unit was a product of the 19th century and the demise of the Ottoman empire, South East Europe emerged only in the late 1990s, despite the fact that the term itself can be traced further back in time. This exemplifies the material but also the symbolic power of European construct embodied by the EU. The case of South East Europe stands out as an example of how Europe has asserted itself, time and again, as an agent setting the standards of normalcy for its periphery. The region has rarely contested this move in earnest. Consider the example of Serb nationalist, suspicious of the encroaching West, but ready to fight against the Islamic 'enemies' of European Christendom in Bosnia or Kosovo. All that in the name of the nation-state, a 19th century ideological borrowing from western Europe. Ultimately, it is Europe which stands as the common denominator around which a new collective identity of the Balkans has begun to crystallise. This does not mean that the sense of belonging to South East Europe has the capacity to override or even challenge national identities. On the contrary, this paper has argued that notions of

Europeanness are essential in the construction of national identities across South East Europe. Contrary to the liberals' portrayal of Europe as an antidote to the excesses of nationalism, the relationship between the different layers of identity – national, regional, European – is fuzzy and multidirectional. The myth of Europe has been catalyst in the process of border-drawing in the Balkans but also in the transcendence of borders.

South East Europe confirms, in my view, the claim that all regions, regardless of the geographical scale, are constructions rooted in political programmes, rather than quasi-natural formations reflecting patterns of shared culture or common past. This has a direct relevance to the Mediterranean in that cultural heterogeneity does not rule out per se region-building. In addition, the experience of South East Europe suggests that the presence of a defining Other is not an absolute prerequisite. The only real Other the countries in question can use is their 'Balkanised' past opposed to their 'European' future. This is very similar to Europe using its pre-1945 history as a sort of Other in constructing its new identity since the 1950s. The cost of not having a clearly-defined Other is certainly the lesser degree of cohesiveness and weaker potential for mobilising social actors. At the same time, there are benefits associated with a greater degree of inclusiveness. To the extent that Mediterranean cannot be imagined in opposition to a significant Other (unless one explores the discontinuities between the littoral territories and their continental hinterlands over the *longue durée*), the Balkans provide a modest success story which can be emulated.

However, such a benign view tends to overlook the power asymmetries in this Europe-centric exercise. Europeanising elites in the Balkans have been content to pursue region-building strategies in compliance with the norms projected by the EU because they have not questioned the legitimacy of Europe as a standard-setter. It is doubtful whether a Mediterranean region can be constructed on such a basis. For the countries of the southern and eastern coast Europe has been as much a magnet and source of inspiration for their efforts to built modern states and societies as a set of colonising powers against whom they have constructed their national identities throughout the 20th century. In addition, the challenge to the *mission civilisatrice* of Europe/the West has been much stronger than in the Balkans, particularly with the rise of political Islam since the 1980s. While in South East Europe, Europe-centricity works more or less fine, in the Mediterranean context the EU faces the profound challenge of coining a new language of genuine partnership.