

I AM FROM THE BALKANS - PROUD OR ASHAMED?*

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Abstract

First of all I have to clarify what constitutes the Balkans. Am I from the Balkans? To date, despite all the debates, books and articles on this topic, nobody has been able to clarify and explain clearly where the borders of the Balkan area are. So it is still not clear if Romania is included or not. Does it depend on values? Do Romanians have the same values as the Turks? We have a different religion, different administrative organization, different laws and rules. Of course we share a common history but this does not give us common values. A region and the identity of the people populating this region are defined and explained through geography, common history, stereotypes, habits and some other criteria that will be used to attempt to answer this question. The task is not easy. "Nothing is simple in the Balkans." This sentence, which opens David Owen's book "Balkan Odyssey", expresses the complexity and difficulty of researching this subject. Should I be proud? Of course I should be! This region is characterized by a huge cultural diversity! Should I be ashamed? The negative connotation of being Balkan has the stigma of being an area of chaos, crisis and retards... The study of the Balkans can be interdisciplinary, so using several fields of study, such as sociology, ethnography, anthropology, political science and cultural studies cannot be avoided. That is why the aim of the paper is to analyze the Balkan identity, in an interdisciplinary approach and to find the place (if there is one) of Balkan characteristics in Romanian cultural traits. Through data from both old and new literature, as well as other sources (including the European Parliament and the European Commission), I will endeavor to establish who is within and who is outside the Balkans.

*The title is inspired by Todorova's dedication in her book *Imagining the Balkans*: "To my parents, from whom I learned to love the Balkans without the need to be proud or ashamed of them".

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Key Words

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Inside or Outside the Borders of the Balkans?

Where are the borders of the Balkans? The Germans say that the Balkans starts in Salzburg. The Austrians are of the opinion that the Balkans begin at the Südbahnhof, the main train station in the south of Vienna. For the citizens of Ljubljana, the Balkans starts in Zagreb and for the people of Zagreb, the Balkans starts in Belgrade. The Romanians do not often question this appurtenance. We are in the EU, so why should we care? And as far as the Bulgarians are concerned, a region in their country is officially called Balkan, so they cannot deny it.

“The Balkan area includes Greece, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Romania, Albania and Hungary”, writes Steven W. Sowards in his “Twenty-Five Lectures on Modern Balkan History”,¹ explaining that Balkan geography revolves around three features: peninsula, mountains and rivers.

From a geographical perspective, it was in 1794 that ‘Bal Kan’, the mountain chain located in Bulgaria running parallel with the Danube, was mentioned for the first time in writing in a letter sent by the Briton John Morrith to his sister.²

The etymology of the name is Turkish, the meaning being ‘mountain chain’: “most of the Ottoman and Turkish dictionaries explain it as a mountain or mountain range.”³ Todorova explains that in Turkish, two noun forms exist today based on the word Balkan. One is a neologism, a proper noun in the plural, ‘Balkanlar’, which designates the states of the Balkan peninsula. The second one is an archaic common noun ‘balkan’ meaning mountain. This explanation is confirmed by the writings of two Turkish authors who have made important contributions regarding a possible explanation for the meaning of the word: Şemseddin Sami characterizes

¹Steven W. Sowards, *Twenty-Five Lectures on Modern Balkan History*, Lecture No. 1, at <http://staff.lib.msu.edu/sowards/balkan/> [last visited March 2009].

²Maria N. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 22.

³*Ibid.*, p. 26.

‘Balkan’ as a “steep or forest covered chain of mountains”⁴ and Ahmed Vefik Paşa also defines ‘Balkan’ as a mountain. Ebru Boyar considers that the word Balkan had various meanings within the 19th and early 20th centuries, explaining that in the dictionaries from these periods the term Balkan defined a mountain or a chain of mountains without a regional geographic definition. In Turkish, as an adjective, the word Balkan is not pejorative and is used with a neutral meaning.⁵

In 1809 the German geographer August Zeune used the term Balkan Peninsula (Balkanhalbeiland)⁶ for the first time in his book *Gea: Versuch einer Wissenschaftlichen Erdbeschreibung (An Attempt to Scientifically Describe the Earth)*. The reason was his misunderstanding of the fact that the Balkan Mountains crossed the entire territory, as far as the Black Sea. But this peninsula is not cut off from its neighboring regions to the east, west or south, which makes it so difficult to isolate it from other regions. “The continuous line is impossible”,⁷ says Ebru Boyar as well. In 1893, in an attempt to ‘repare’ (sic) the mistake made by Zeune, another German geographer Theobald Fisher proposed that, instead of calling this region the ‘Balkan Peninsula’, the term ‘Südosteuropa’⁸ (Southeastern Europe) should be used. In the meantime, however, the term Balkan Peninsula had gained common usage because of the need for a reference to this region, and in the early twentieth century the term was used increasingly more often, and developed a more political than geographical connotation. It confuses the Balkan Peninsula as a geographical region with the Balkans as a geopolitical homogeneous area, with a mixture of populations from different historical backgrounds- Greeks, Slavs, Uighurs, Latins, Germans- and the states that have formed therefrom. In her chapter regarding “The Balkans: From Discovery to Invention”, Todorova commented that the Balkan area is geographically inextricable from Europe, although from a cultural point of

⁴Sami Şemseddin, *Kamûs-ü Türkî*, Istanbul, 1999, in Ebru Boyar, *Ottomans, Turks and the Balkans. Empire Lost, Relations Altered*, London and New York, Tauris Academic Studies, 2007, p. 30

⁵Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, p. 32.

⁶Vesna Goldsworthy, “The Balkans in Nineteenth Century British Travel Writing”, in Tim Youngs, *Travel Writing in the Nineteenth Century*, Anthem Pr. 2007, p. 19.

⁷Ebru Boyar, *Ottomans, Turks and the Balkans. Empire Lost, Relations Altered*, London and New York, Tauris Academic Studies, 2007.

⁸Maria N. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, p. 27-28.

view it is constructed as ‘the other’.⁹

In Turkish, as Ebru Boyar has explained, the term ‘Balkan’ could be used in the phrase *Balkan Şeb-i Ceziresi* – the ‘Balkan Peninsula’ – referring to a specific geographical location. According to Şemseddin Sami, the area of *Balkan Şeb-i Ceziresi*, “which had been Ottoman territory since the end of the Middle Ages, consisted of the territories of the European sections of the state and was known as Ottoman Europe or Rumeli (Turquie d’Europe).”¹⁰ The explanation of Şemseddin Sami is that with the independence of some parts of this territory, the name *Turquie d’Europe* or *Ottoman Europe* did not cover the whole area anymore, “which began to be called instead the *Balkan Peninsula*.”¹¹ On the other hand, Boyar stated that the terms ‘Rumeli’ and ‘Balkan Peninsula’ were interchangeable and ‘Rumeli’ does not equate with ‘Balkan’ (although in the 20th century many historians used them as synonyms). In fact, said Boyar, the term ‘Balkan’ began to be used in Turkey to mean the region only in the late 1870s, but it was seen as a Eurocentric term and not as an Ottoman-centric term. Quite simply, the term *Balkan* has fluctuated in meaning and territory covered, but

essentially means in the European understanding both ex-Ottoman territories and those territories still under Ottoman Empire. The *Balkans* were depicted as including the Ottoman European territories of Eastern Rumeli, Macedonia, Kosova, autonomous Bulgaria and Bosnia-Herzegovina, which was de facto under the occupation of Austria-Hungary, together with the independent states of the region: Greece, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro.¹²

Boyar also gives some possible explanations for this term not being used in Turkish for a long period of time: censorship under Abdülhamid I, an intellectual response to the imposition of European conceptualization or the European emphasis on religion (the term being perceived as religiously loaded). Another explanation is that the Ottomans did not need such a term “since they did not, unlike the Europeans, perceive the region any differently

⁹Ibid, p. 116-135.

¹⁰Boyar, *Ottomans, Turks and the Balkans. Empire Lost, Relations Altered*, p. 31.

¹¹Sami Şemseddin, *Kamûs-ı Türkî*, p. 31.

¹²Boyar, *Ottomans, Turks and the Balkans. Empire Lost, Relations Altered*, p. 34.

now from how they had before.”¹³ After the Revolution of 1908, the term started to be used as a geographical designation for the governments established on Ottoman European lands, becoming a part of Ottoman vocabulary along with the Balkan war, which was in 1930 already becoming an integral part of Turkish vocabulary, in both geographical and political terms. “The borders of the region were defined not according to fixed latitudes and longitudes, but according to changing political borders and alliances.”¹⁴

Costis Hadjimichalis, from the Department of Geography at Harokopio University, Athens, Greece, wrote about changes in the geography of Europe. He criticized the process of European integration, which paid too little attention to the space and geography that “continue to remain concealed although they are at the core of the entire process.”¹⁵ In his opinion, the changes in the political geography of the Balkans had, unfortunately, not been entirely understood by the great powers. He saw the Balkans and southeastern Europe as “elements of new inclusive European geographies.”¹⁶ In turn, Hugh Pulton considered that “[i]ts geographical position has historically resulted in it being disrupted by invaders moving from Asia Minor to Europe and vice-versa. The three oldest peoples in the area under study are the Greeks, the Vlachs and the Albanians.”¹⁷

A study carried out by Vladimir Gligorov about trade and investment in the Balkans included Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia, Romania and Bulgaria. The criteria for inclusion were mainly geographical and, to a lesser extent, historical, as the author explained: “Some countries raise strong objections to being included in the Balkans. Some, like Slovenia and Croatia, prefer to be treated as Central European countries on geographical and historical grounds also. However, regions are not exclusive, so a country can participate in more than one region.”¹⁸ Gligorov’s explanation for ‘multiparticipation’ is

¹³Ibid, p. 38.

¹⁴Ibid, p. 41.

¹⁵Costis Hadjimichalis, “The Changing Geography of Europe: A Balkan and Southern European View”, *European Urban and Regional Studies*, Vol. 1, 2004, p. 363.

¹⁶Ibid, p. 366.

¹⁷Hugh Pulton, *The Balkans. Minorities and States in Conflict*, London, Minority Right Publications, 1991, p. 1.

¹⁸<http://www.wiiw.ac.at/balkan/files/Gligorov.pdf>.

that the Balkans are a region of overlapping regions, some of the countries belonging to Central Europe, others to the Mediterranean area and/or to the Black Sea region.

The Balkan Insight website¹⁹ contains current information about nine countries in the Balkans; it keeps the readers up to date on the latest developments in the region through investigative reports providing information on various aspects of this region. The countries included are Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia. This time Turkey is excluded. As far as this last country is concerned, an important work in the field, "The Origins of the Ottoman Empire" mentioned and analyzed the "establishment of the Ottoman state in the Balkan peninsula".²⁰ In the "History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey", Ezel Kural Shaw and Stanford J. Shaw speak about the involvement of Turkey in the Balkan wars, the Balkan crisis and about its relations with its Balkan neighbors. The reference to the Balkan Mountains is clearly to the Bulgarian chain.²¹ Regarding the people from the Balkan area, they were seen, before and during the first Balkan crisis (which ended in 1877), as vassals: "The sultan expressed his regret that his Balkan vassals had revolted without cause and praised the courage of his army".²² Speaking about the Congress of Berlin (1878), the authors pointed out that each Balkan state had something to complain about (Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia), but "the Ottomans had regained the district"²³ at Berlin, not only hurting the Serbian economy but also preventing their direct access to the southern Slavs in Montenegro".²⁴ In "The Ottomans and the Balkans", Fikret Adanir and Suraiya Faroqhi arrived at much the same conclusion regarding the 'Balkanism' of Turkey: "After the end of World War II, the Balkan peninsula was divided, with Greece and Turkey becoming NATO members and the other Balkan countries, except Yugoslavia, part of the Warsaw Pact".²⁵ Historically, it must be mentioned that in February 1934,

¹⁹<http://www.balkaninsight.com>.

²⁰Mehmut Fuat Köprülü, *The Origins of the Ottoman Empire*, translated and edited by Gary Laiser, New York, State University of New York Press, 1991, p. 4

²¹Ezel Kural Shaw and Stanford J. Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey- Vol. II*, Cambridge University Press, 1977, pp. 162-184.

²²Ibid, p. 186.

²³Novipazar District

²⁴Shaw and Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, p. 196.

²⁵Fikret Adanir and Suraiya Faroqhi, *The Ottomans and the Balkans*, Leiden-Boston-Köln,

Turkey joined the Balkan Entente Treaty with Greece, Yugoslavia and Romania, guaranteeing each other sovereign integrity and independence.

Regarding Romania, the question as to whether it is in the Balkans or not has multiple answers. According to Andrei Plesu, a Romanian philosopher, “Romania is in some way in the Balkans - especially through Wallachia - but, on the other hand, we are not directly members of this community. We’re both inside and outside, we are at the border. We are north of the Danube and have fun sometimes to say that we are a sort of Scandinavia of Balkans”.²⁶ Another Romanian historian, Nicolae Iorga, a specialist in Balkanology,²⁷ argued that Romania is not a Balkan country because it is beyond the Balkan mountain range, which separates the peninsula from the rest of Europe. In 1930, he believed that Bulgaria remained the only Balkan country: “From the geographical point of view, Bulgaria is the only Balkan state today because Yugoslavia extends to the border with Italy, and Greece is a Mediterranean country; in the case of Turkey, it represents an extension of an almost insignificant Asian state”.²⁸

The reason for some other authors including Romania on the map of the Balkans is due to the extension of the connotation to the whole of the southeastern Europe area. On the other hand, the Latinity of Romania is another argument against its membership in the Balkans. We can even speak about a special destiny of this country through its orthodoxy and Latinity as a link between East and West.

In the 2009 Eurovision song contest, Romania sent a song with the title “The Balkan Girls”. Nobody expected Romania to get more points. The song “The Balkan Girls”, interpreted by “party girl” Elena was inappropriate, especially since Romania is not part of the Balkans”, commented the German TV station, ARD / NDR.

EU Perspective

At the level of the European Union, there is a clear separation of the Balkans. The Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU was a

Brill, 2002, p. 26, Footnotes.

²⁶Andrei Plesu, “*Pourquoi doit-on sauver les Balkans?*”, Martor 6/2001, p. 79.

²⁷Field of research regarding the Balkan area.

²⁸Nicolae Iorga, “*E oare Romania un stat balcanic?*”, in *Secolul 20*, 7-9/1997, p. 123.

special process created in 2000 for the Western Balkans.

At present, there are three candidate countries: Croatia, Turkey and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Accession negotiations with the first two started on 3 October 2005. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia became a candidate country in December 2005 but accession negotiations have not started yet. The other countries of the Western Balkans- Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo under UNSC Resolution 1244/99 have all been promised the prospect of EU membership as and when they are ready. They are known as potential candidate countries.²⁹

In October last year, the European Commission adopted its annual strategy document explaining its policy on EU enlargement and showing the progress made over the last twelve months by each candidate and potential candidate: Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey, as well as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo.³⁰

The area is seen as a key and valuable partner for the EU. The questions raised by the members of the European Parliament to the Commission, regarding different points of collaboration with the Balkan region (trade, combating corruption), only received answers with references to the countries mentioned previously from the Western Balkans, with no mention of the other (possible) Balkan countries.

A report from the European Parliament from 11 November 2008 aimed to evaluate gender issues and the situation of women living in the Balkans. Although the title of the report included the entire Balkan area, geographically the report focused on candidate countries and potential candidate countries. In a recent document (entitled “Catherine Ashton to visit the Western Balkans”)³¹ regarding the agenda of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and

²⁹[http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/the-policy/countries-on-the-road-to-membership /index _e n.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/the-policy/countries-on-the-road-to-membership/index_en.htm) - the web-site of the European Commission [last visited May 2010].

³⁰http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/press_corner/key-documents/reports_oct_2009_en.htm [last visited July 2010].

³¹www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/.../112914.pdf [last visited May 2010].

Vice President of the Commission, three countries were mentioned as the Western Balkans: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo. It is not clear from this document if, at the level of the European Commission, only the three mentioned countries are now considered to be in the Western Balkans. In any case, in most of the documents issued at the level of the European Commission or the European Parliament, it is mentioned that the Balkan area is seen as a key and valuable partner for the EU, without clearly defining which countries are included. In none of them is Romania mentioned as a Balkan country. Probably, being already a member country, Romania is recognized as a valuable partner and the question of its 'Balkan membership' is not important.

Historical Perspective

Todorova divides the evolution of 'Balkanism' into three stages:

1. The Balkans were first 'discovered' in the late eighteenth century by Western travelers. Although these first Western accounts of the Balkans contained some geographical inaccuracies, their treatment of the Balkans was primarily classificatory and descriptive.
2. After a series of Balkan wars and with the advent of World War I, the Balkans were increasingly imbued with "political, social, cultural, and ideological overtones" and 'Balkan' was increasingly used as a pejorative term.
3. Today the term Balkan has been almost completely disassociated from its object, as journalists and academics utilize the construct of the Balkans as a powerful symbol.

M. Mazower, the author of "The Balkans", constructs a chronology of the Balkans' history based on "approximative and speculative dates", as he himself points out. He starts with the foundation of Constantinople, in 330, then goes through the division of the Roman Empire, the conquests of Bosnia, Wallachia and Moldavia, the defeat of the Hungarians by the Ottomans, the unsuccessful Ottoman assault on Vienna, the end of the Venetian Republic, Greek independence, the Unification of the Danube Principalities as Romania, the first and the second Balkan wars, German

withdrawal from the Balkans, the death of Tito and finishes with the war in Kosovo in 1999 between the NATO states and Serbia- in total 59 hot eras of Balkan history.

A possible explanation for the construction of the Balkan region as it is being used is its common history, from agrarian societies to civilized entities. The countries of Southeastern Europe share a common heritage, partially given by the Byzantine culture and later by Ottoman rule in the Balkans. More specifically, as Nuri Yurdusev said, the rule of the Ottoman Empire was extended “from Central Europe to Transcaucasia, from Poland to Yemen and from Morocco to the Persian Gulf”.³² Byzantium, as a synthesis of dynamic input from Roman politics, Greek culture, religious orthodoxy and Oriental tradition, exerted strong influence on Southeastern Europe. Byzantine culture was perpetuated in mannerisms, popular customs, architecture and painting, especially in the religious sector. Some authors consider that this ‘Balkanism’ can be viewed as a variation on the Orientalist theme, due to the long Ottoman rule in the region. The fact that ‘Ottoman’ is nearly always in opposition to ‘European’ questions the contributions and reforms that Ottoman rule brought to the region. Nuri Yurdusev’s view on this topic concentrated on the parallel between Ottoman and European diplomacy, considering the Ottoman attitude toward diplomacy as an institution of the modern international system as it emerged from its European basis via the formation of the European state system.³³ His explanation for the possible opposition between Ottoman and European views was that, being faithful to Islamic principles and due to the “absolute superiority of Islam,”³⁴ the Ottomans distanced themselves from the infidel Europeans, adopting a negative attitude toward European diplomacy. Nevertheless, the Ottoman Empire became an active participant in the emerging European system, playing an important role in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in preserving the European balance and the formation of nation-states.³⁵ The conclusion of Yurdusev was that we cannot deny the cultural differences, mostly derived from religion, between European states and the Ottoman Empire and the impact of those differences upon their

³²Nuri Yurdusev (ed.), *Ottoman Diplomacy. Conventional or Unconventional*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p. 3.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid, p. 6.

³⁵Ibid, p. 22.

mutual interactions.³⁶

In the nineteenth century, at the end of the Ottoman Empire, the question of the division of the Balkans from the great power arose.

Starting with the Serbs and the Greeks and culminating with the Albanians and the Christian Slavs of Bosnia before the First World War, the creation of a single nation-state was felt to be the only way of obtaining security and collective fulfillment in an insecure neighborhood, at least among the educated city dwellers who would manage to dominate politics during the era of small states.³⁷

Another common feature was the spread of communism in this part of Europe (except for Greece and Turkey), which gave way to other shared characteristics: the fight for freedom, the policy of “secrecy” and the omnipotent secret police, and the rejection of the apparatus of terror. Gallagher considered that the “Soviet overlordship, and then the national Stalinist backlash against it in Albania and Romania, placed much of the region on the path of underdevelopment. Low-grade heavy industrial economies were installed under which warped ideological goals replaced normal developmental ones with disastrous effects that will be felt long into the new millennium.”³⁸

From this perspective, Nicolae Iorga spoke about a “South-East Europe as a big country”, saying that the lands shared the same memories. A common historical destiny brings out a sort of affinity between these countries. On the other hand, the same author argued for the thesis of the unity of Southeastern Europe as a regional entity, but he rejected the idea of the unity of the Balkan peoples, due to the widely-differing ethnic, social and economic points of view. Two other authors, Fikret Adanir and Suraiya Faroqhi, also claimed that the Balkan area has a long history of conflicts, with differences in economic and cultural development.³⁹ The ethnic mixture is, to a certain extent, responsible for instability, disorder and tension. Maybe

³⁶Ibid, p. 29.

³⁷Tom Gallagher, “A Balkan History Learning Curve”, *European History Quarterly*, No. 31, Sage Publication, (2001), p. 143.

³⁸Ibid, p. 152.

³⁹Fikret Adanir and Suraiya Faroqhi, *The Ottomans and the Balkans*, p. 26.

it is this difference inside a confined geographical space which could be a possible explanation for the old and multiple conflicts, with the Balkan area being considered responsible for the outbreak of the First World War. Old problems between neighbors, like the war between Serbia and Bulgaria in 1885, or the more recent one inside the same country (Kosovo), have provoked a growing interest regarding their own identity. Moreover, at the same time as the achievements of independence, sometimes in difficult conditions, institutions had been introduced and standards set. But the modern Balkans are still viewed through the politics of ethnicity and the economics of dependence.

Balkan, A Negative Label?

Citizens from Southern and Eastern Europe have vehemently rejected the label often attached to Balkan countries. The reason for this defensive attitude is the pejorative connotation acquired by the concept. According to Maria Todorova, it is “one of the strongest pejorative labels in history, international relations, political science and contemporary intellectual discourse.”⁴⁰ Todorova identifies three causes: first, small mistakes resulting from incorrect geographical knowledge transmitted by tradition from generation to generation. Second, the geographical designation has been saturated with political, social, cultural and ideological connotations, to the point that in the early twentieth century the word Balkans already had negative connotations. Third, the dissociation between the name and its referent has triggered the subsequent development of a pejorative meaning which we retrospectively associated with the geographical area of the Balkans, especially after 1898. From this perspective, we can talk about what Todorova calls “the invention of the Balkans” - a mental construction of this region as a negative projection of the West, a projection created through the stereotypes that facilitate the perception of one another, simplifying the reality.

“Knowledge about the Balkans, including the paradigms and fundamental concepts in which that knowledge was expressed, was not produced in the Balkans itself”,⁴¹ says Diana Mishkova, arriving at much the

⁴⁰Maria Todorova, *Balkanii: de la descoperire la inventie*, in *Secolul 20*, 7-9/ 1997, p. 95.

⁴¹Diana Mishkova, “Symbolic Geographies and Visions of Identity: A Balkan Perspective”, *European Journal of Social Theory*, No. 11, Sage Publication, (2008), p. 239.

same conclusion as Todorova. I would like to take the liberty of disagreeing with her. It is true that, up to a certain point, the outsider took over this task of constructing a portrait of people from the Balkans, but this does not mean that it is not also a self-constructed image. For example, in the introduction of the book “The Balkans. Minorities and States in Conflict”, the author, Hugh Poulton, chose a poem written in Skopje in 1983:

“land of our land blood of our blood
we’re the sons of the righteous we’re the brave
with rifle in hand for class or for God
we come from the mountains we won from the grave
in the lake there’s thirty thousand cries
from the snow on the hills to the plains inside
the past whispers in the sky....”

This poem does not give us just information about the people, depicting them as “the brave and the righteous”, but also geographical information, “mountains, plains, lake”, and historical as well - the whispers of the past. My approach is that the construction of the image inside the area (though facts, written or unwritten) is another possible explanation for the stereotypes. Another example, the CATIbus study, conducted in February by Mercury Research, proves that the Romanians are very conscious of their own identity and are able to make a self-portrait: difficult life, fight for survival, hard-working, but active and honest, have patriotic feelings, a big heart and are smart.⁴² On the other side, Western writers have strengthened the West’s own self-image as the superior civilization, in opposition to the Balkan one, in a membership category of ‘we’ and ‘the others’. A study conducted by Mercury Research in 2008 for the Agency for Governmental Strategies in Romania shows that the first things that Spaniards spontaneously associate with this country are poverty and misery (21%), delinquency (9%), Roma (5%) and the fact that Romania is a country with economic difficulties and unemployment (5%). Additionally, 4% of those surveyed associated Romania with Dracula, and Transylvania with vampires.

The rejection of ‘Balkanism’ has also been used by politicians in

⁴²The CATIbus study was conducted in February 2009 by Mercury Research on a sample of 680 persons in urban areas aged over 18 years and is available at <http://www.publicinfo.ro/pagini/index.php> (in Romanian).

electoral speeches. In his 1997 presidential campaign, the Croatian Social Liberal Party candidate, Vlado Gotovac, for example, criticized the 'Balkan tendencies' of Tudjman and, in contrast, portrayed himself as a European leader. Pro-Western orientation became even more pronounced after 1989 when, after the fall of communism, all the countries in Southeastern Europe became engaged in a competition for Europe, with each trying to get rid of the Balkan stigma. The degree of interest towards Western European values varied. Croatia, for example, like Slovenia, was more integrated in European networks than other republics from the former Yugoslav federation, due to its Hapsburg legacy, geographical location, and trade orientation toward Western markets.

If somebody is just speaking about the Balkans or traveling there, the point of departure is the prejudicial baggage. The stereotype of 'being Balkan,' Todorova said, was founded in the early twentieth century in the absence of a clear idea of what 'Balkan' really meant. Insofar as this term was used to describe regional characteristics such as general hospitality, historical retards or misery, it was much too vague and general so it could therefore have been attached to people outside the Balkan region as well. But it is important to mention that 'being Balkan' was somehow used in opposition to 'being European', which symbolized cleanliness, order, self-control, strong character, law, justice, etc. It was the perception of the West, derived from the gap between Western Europe and Eastern Europe. In the postwar era, Mark Mazower believes, the clichés became less powerful; the Balkans somehow disappeared from the Western conscious during the Cold War. Since the end of the Cold War, the Balkans has been associated with blood and tears in the minds of the general public and politicians. The notion of 'being European' is still used today, but with a new connotation- as a member of the European Union. People not residing in the EU are seen, to a certain extent, as non-European. Considering the fact that Western Europe is already nearly entirely in the EU, the rest of the 'non Europeans' are again... the Balkan countries, although with the two last waves of accession, a large proportion of the 'others'- mentioned on the previous pages- became part of the 'we'. Accession to the European Union is seen, in some ways, as a form of exit from the Balkans and a return to Europe. In the meantime, the differences between West and East have been transformed into a Europe-Balkan dichotomy, which greatly influenced developing individual national identities. The deployment of Balkan stereotypes by Western leaders and

journalists is a phenomenon which Maria Todorova calls ‘Balkanism’.⁴³ Another definition of ‘Balkanism’ is given by M. Razsa and N. Lindstrom as a “dichotomous and essentialist system of representations embodied in stereotypes around which Europe has set itself apart from a Balkan “other””.⁴⁴

The baggage of prejudice has not been limited to tourists or ordinary people traveling through this part of Europe. For a long time politicians and journalists have been trapped in this stereotype as well, and to this day some of them still are. As Tom Gallagher points out, a British journalist, Misha Glenny, reported for the BBC World Service 90th about a region with authoritarian elites and atavistic populations, incapable of good government and reasonable conduct: “British politicians frequently cited his reportage as sound evidence for keeping out of the region, beyond tendering humanitarian assistance, and allowing its ‘ancient ethnic hatreds’ to burn themselves out as in times past”.⁴⁵ In early 1941, Sir Alexander Cadogan, the head of the British Foreign Office, confided to his diary that “All these Balkan peoples are trash”,⁴⁶ in response to the Balkan states’ refusal to be drawn into hostilities after 1939. Hitler had used the same word (Gerümpel)⁴⁷ in *Mein Kampf* about the Balkan peoples. Novelists and film makers have been also inspired by the negative image of the Balkans. Eric Ambler, in “The Mask of Dimitrios”, an American film noir, presents the Balkans as the moral decay of Europe between wars, especially Turkey and Bulgaria. Throughout “The Secret of Chimneys”, Agatha Christie provides a description of the Balkans as a place where the main hobbies are assassinating kings and having revolutions.⁴⁸ Rebecca West admits at the beginning of her travelogue that violence was the only thing she knew about the Balkans.⁴⁹ Kazim Karabekir, an important figure in the First World War, considered the Balkan mountains to be a hot bed of bandits threatening the power and the security of the

⁴³Todorova, *The Ottomans and the Balkans*, p. 194.

⁴⁴M. Razsa and N. Lindstrom, “Balkan is Beautiful: Balkanism in the Political Discourse of Tudman’s Croatia,” *East European Politics and Societies*, No. 18, (2004), p. 632.

⁴⁵Gallagher, “A Balkan History Learning Curve”, p. 142.

⁴⁶Mark Wheeler, “Not so Black as it’s Painted : The Balkan Political Heritage”, in F.W. Carter and H.T. Norris, *The Changing Shape of the Balkans*, London, Westview Press, 1995, p. 245.

⁴⁷Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, Zentralverlag der NSDAP, München, 1943, p. 779.

⁴⁸Agatha Christie, *The Secret of Chimneys*, New York, 1975, p. 105.

⁴⁹Rebecca West , *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* , New York, Penguin Twentieth Century Classics, 1994, in Prologue, p. 1-24.

state.⁵⁰

An important thing to be mentioned is the development of stereotypes inside the Balkan area. As we will see later in the part regarding Balkan cooking, the Bulgarians have a special pejorative word, 'mamaligari', for their neighbors, the Romanians. Croatians deployed similar Balkan stereotypes to differentiate themselves from their ethnic neighbors. "Balkanist rhetoric was utilized to legitimize Croatia's quest for independence as a necessary emancipation from its 'Balkan burden' and its return to its rightful place in Europe. Croatians presented themselves as more progressive, prosperous, hard-working, tolerant, democratic, or, in a word, European, in contrast to their primitive, lazy, intolerant, or Balkan, neighbors to the south-east".⁵¹

Beyond Stereotypes

To find an answer to the question regarding the membership of a country in the Balkans, we must investigate the particularity of the Balkans and the identity of the people beyond stereotypes. First, who the inhabitants of the Balkans actually are should be clarified, and as Steven W. Soward rightly notes, nobody could understand the Balkans without understanding its people⁵²: Albanians, who 'appeared' in the Western Balkans around 1200 BC and the Greeks, who are as ancient as the Albanians in their Balkan ties. The 19th century model for Greek entry into the area involved three 'waves' of invaders riding in carts, driving cattle and overwhelming the pre-Indo-European inhabitants: first, the Romanians, with a complicated and controversial history, the migrating Slavs who reached the Balkans during the waves of 'barbarian' invasions at the end of the Roman Empire; second, the Hungarians or Magyars who came to Europe in 895 AD, crossing the Carpathians from the Ukraine and then conquering the Slavs who lived in the Pannonian basin (thereby dividing the South Slavs from the Czechs, Slovaks and Poles- Hungarian is a Finno-Ugric language, the only one in the Balkans); and finally, the Turks, who now have possession of only a small

⁵⁰Quoted in Boyar, *Ottomans, Turks and the Balkans. Empire Lost, Relations Altered*, p. 30.

⁵¹Milica Bakic-Hayden and Robert Hayden, "Orientalist Variations on the Theme 'Balkans': Symbolic Geography in Recent Yugoslav Cultural Politics", *Slavic Review*, No. 51, (1992), p. 1-10.

⁵²Steven W. Sowards, *"Moderne Geschichte des Balkans"*, Norderstedt- Germany, 2004, p.21.

corner of the Balkans, but at one time ruled much of it. In his book about minorities in the Balkans, a region described as one of the most ethnically, linguistically and religiously complex area in the world, Hugh Poulton dedicates a chapter to each population in this area: the Serbs, the Catholic North- Croats and Slovenes, Muslims, Montenegrins and Macedonians, Albanians and Kosovars, Roma, Turks, Hungarians, Greeks, Bulgarians, Vlachs and Jews.⁵³

Although it is difficult to speak about general stereotypes when so many people from different nations are concerned, the conclusion of the ethnographers and anthropologists studying the common characteristics of people living in the Balkan region is that they have another behavior, another mentality and another style of constructing the environment. Andrei Plesu talks about a regime of pleasures with Oriental influence in the Balkans,⁵⁴ as a condition for ‘membership’ in the region. Another author, Kiossev, considers that the common characteristics are even visible at a physical level, saying that a Balkan person abroad can recognize another Balkan person in the street by his or her gait, by other mannerisms, by the inimitable mechanics of the body, by his behavior- traits commonly shared by most Balkan people.⁵⁵

In the Balkan mentality approximation and improvisation play an important role, which means there is a certain freedom that makes it possible for each individual to find his own way or solution to a certain problem, or, as Kiossev says, “free space for maneuvering”.⁵⁶ This can be seen as a specific characteristic of Balkan people, somehow in contradiction with the other Europeans who are following more strict and precise rules. Another defining feature of Balkan culture, the one that gives it a kind of unity, is the fusion of indigenous aspects with imported ones. On the one hand, the West was viewed as a model of civilization, and therefore the desire to synchronize with this culture was the reason for a lot of imports, sometimes inappropriate. In terms of mentality, throughout the entire Balkan area we find elements imported from the West. These elements, added to the

⁵³Poulton, *The Balkans. Minorities and States in Conflict*.

⁵⁴Andrei Plesu, *Pourquoi doit-on sauver les Balkans?*, Martor 6/2001, p. 76.

⁵⁵Alexander Kiossev, “The Dark Intimacy: Maps, Identities, Acts of Identifications”, in *Balkan as Metaphor. Between Globalization and Fragmentation*, ed. D.I. Bjelić, O. Savić, Cambridge, 2002.

⁵⁶Ibid.

indigenous one with Oriental origins, produce a very original mixture. The famous Balkan generosity, one of the most important characteristics of the area, is evident in the attitude towards guests. They are provided with the most beautiful and comfortable room in the home and the food must be in huge quantities, more than necessary, to emphasize the consideration of the hosts. The notion of 'enough' does not really exist. If the guest refuses to eat or at least to taste everything that is on the table, it is a kind of offense. Even in times of insufficiency (war time or communist times), the guest had to be given whatever was best in the home. The pride of the Balkan people may be the consequence of a specific experience developed during the decades of military occupation or domestic instability in the region. The fight against communist rule (in public or in secret) and the desire for freedom produced another stereotype of the Balkan people- one of violent nationalists. A special place among the nationalists, according to Fikret Adanir and Suraiya Faroqhi, is held by the Muslims from Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁵⁷ The violence perpetrated by Serbs against Muslim civilians in the 1990s also had an immense impact on Western public opinion. The situation being critical, external intervention was needed. NATO forces came to "save the situation", but the conflict was pinpointed by the journalists and politicians as being somewhere in the Balkans, without showing precisely the place of the war on the map. That is how the Balkans became the place of violent ethnic conflict, without consideration of the fact that most of the countries from this area were not involved in the conflict and had nothing to do with the Muslim-Serbian ideological differences. "The recent wars in the former Yugoslavia were often termed Balkan wars despite the fact they were confined to former Yugoslav republics".⁵⁸ But why should somebody consider that the Balkans are doomed to violence and instability? "The conventional thinking has been that the Balkans were doomed to instability because of the ethnic and religious heterogeneity in the region", Sule Kut and N. Asli Sirin explained in their article about "The Bright Side of Balkan Politics".⁵⁹ On the other hand, we should mention that the Balkan region has also had a good number of initiatives for cooperation and peace. For

⁵⁷Fikret Adanir and Suraiya Faroqhi, *The Ottomans and the Balkans*, p. 50.

⁵⁸Maple Razsa and Nicole Lindstrom, "Balkan Is Beautiful: Balkanism in the Political Discourse of Tudman's Croatia", *East European Politics and Societies*, No. 18, (2004), p. 632.

⁵⁹Sule Kut and N. Asli Sirin, "The Bright Side of Balkan Politics: Cooperation in the Balkans", in Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos and Thanos Veremis, *Is Southern Europe Doomed to Instability*, London-Portland, Frank Cass, 2002, p. 10.

example, the Balkan Conference from 1930 desired to encourage cooperation in the economic, social, cultural and political fields. Four years later, the Balkan pact- signed by Turkey, Greece, Romania and Yugoslavia- had security purposes. So, if we put these facts into the equation, we can clearly answer that the Balkans are not doomed forever to instability and violence. If it were so, the European Union would refuse any association or cooperation pacts. This is not the case, since the European Union is already present in the Balkans and the Balkans are already present in the EU (with the integration of Greece, Romania and Bulgaria).

Balkan Life: Music and Cooking

An important part of Balkan life is the music, a hybrid creation that combines different elements. Its primary sources are the oral tradition of music in all the Balkan countries to which the influences of pop, rock, jazz and rap have been added. According to studies by foreign musicologists, Balkan music has been characterized as very imaginative, very free, open to improvisation and highly contrasting with the ‘official folklore’. Although it borrows many elements of the national folk music, it is much more direct, being based on the immediate realities. Dynamic or lascivious passion, this kind of music sometimes has almost vulgar texts, but it is very connected to events and dates from reality. This Balkan music, as its name says, is a characteristic of the Balkans, a link between the countries from this region, but at same time it illustrates, through its different nuances from country to country, the diversity of the Balkans, like the specific cuisine in this area of Europe. The last topic, Balkan cuisine, deserves a little more attention. “Tell me what you eat”- the renowned gastronome Brillat- Savarin said in 1825 – “and I’ll say what you are”. Nothing reflects better, in fact, the changes in civilization as the history of food. Cooking in the Balkan region has common characteristics, influenced by the barbarian invasions, conquests of Islam, the Italian Renaissance and especially the discovery of America, but the Ottoman Empire is the main source of inspiration for Balkan cuisine. Across the Balkan region there is an abundance of vegetables, spices and special dishes such as lamb on skewers, stuffed vine leaves, rice pilaf, cucumber salad, soups, etc.

Today, in the kitchens of the eastern Mediterranean area, which corresponds to the former Empire of the East, the so-called ‘Oriental Empire’ – Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Albania-

we can find a mixture of Byzantine and Ottoman popular tradition. Jean Ferniot said that the Balkan countries subject to Ottoman occupation- Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, and southern Romania- were closed off from Western influences for several centuries.⁶⁰ The occupiers accustomed the locals to their cuisine, but the influence was not great enough to prohibit pork in the region. It was then that the Germanic influence on Central Europe prevailed, where the Ottoman influence was not so strong. The Ottoman influence was visible not only in recipes but also in the names of dishes. An example is a cookbook printed in Bulgaria in the second half of the nineteenth century: “Cookbook and Instructions for Any Type of Food in Fashion in Istanbul”.

The changes in eating habits, pronounced after the First World War, grew even more rapidly after the economies began to expand in the 1950s. Progress in science and technology, particularly in the field of chemistry, biology and medicine, exerted influences on our cooking- the recipes, the ideas and the ingredients- by moving from one place to another.

“Contrary to political ideas, new food habits and objects of art, games, good manners travelled quickly and their acceptance depended entirely on the will, taste and power of buying”,⁶¹ a good explanation for the impossibility of determining which country had a certain dish first, such as a special dish made out of corn, for example. In Romania it is called ‘mamaliga’, in Germany and Austria ‘Sterz’, in Italy ‘polenta’, in Poland ‘lulesza’, in the east of this country being known as ‘mamatuga’. The question is: who was the first to prepare it? Both Romania and Italy consider this to be traditional and a kind of country brand, but corn is an American grain, as Jean Ferniot points out, consumed for centuries by the Native Americans. So, it might be possible that the Balkans were not the first. The Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian language does not give an etymology for ‘mamaliga’; however, we can find the term, ‘mamaligari’, in the dictionary, which is derived from ‘mamaliga’ as a word used by the Bulgarians, which means men without initiative and without energy, used to describe the Romanians.

⁶⁰Jean Ferniot, *Europe a la table, Les Editions du Mecene*, Paris, 1993.

⁶¹Martin Bruegel and Bruno Laurioux, *Histoire et identité alimentaires en Europe*, Strasbourg, Hachette, 2002, p. 102.

Another gastronomic proof of the Balkan mixture is ‘pilaf’- which actually came from the Turkish name (pilav)- into Romanian language. Another proof that the dish came from Turkey is that ‘pilafgiu’ in Romanian was a name given by the Romanians to the Turks during the Ottoman occupation. Another traditional dish in Romania, and part of the Romanian identity, is ‘sarma’, always served on the most important occasions in life- weddings, burials, and Christmas Eve. The Romanians are proud of this dish and every foreigner is advised to taste it if he wants to experience a part of the Romanian identity. But the truth must be said- ‘sarma’ is another name with Turkish origins- common in Croatia or Serbia as well, to an extent that the bases of national Romanian pride could be debatable. Two Romanian anthropologists studying the ‘issue of sarmale’, said that its description as a typically Romanian, Bulgarian, as well as Serbian, dish is obviously suggestive of the existence of a common Balkan background, but at the same time it demonstrated the differences: it almost never was the same kind of food, regional diversity making it possible for the same dish to be different from one region to another.⁶² Finally, whatever the origin, the fact is that the national identity in the Balkan area even extends through cookbooks.

This culinary unit of the region has many nuances in each country and each region has a particular way of preparing dishes. The traveler’s roads and influences are not only from East to West, but also vice versa. Thus, Balkan cooking has become the cuisine of Europe.

Conclusion

Homo Balkanicus, Part of European Identity

Steven W. Sowards defines the Balkans as another Europe. Why is it another? Because it is different. Are these differences so huge as to make it impossible to integrate Balkan values into the big family of European values? No. Are the Romanians different from Germans, for example? Yes, they are. “A Romanian is a Romanian without a shadow of resemblance to a Turk, a Bosnian, a Galician, a Serb, a Montenegrin or a Greek”.⁶³ But the British people are also different from the Germans, in the same way as we

⁶²Vintila Mihailescu & Anton Roman, “How National Is ‘the National Cuisine’” in Irina Culic, István Horvath, Cristian Stan, *Reflections on Differences. Focus on Romania*, Limes, Cluj-Napoca, 1999.

⁶³Goldsworthy, “The Balkans in Nineteenth Century British Travel Writing,” p. 21.

are. Maybe we have our own humor, our own style of working, approaching a problem and finding a solution. The Italians, for example, also have their own ways, but nobody can say which is better or worse. The Brits, in their turn, have a unique and specific way of constructing their humor. Whether it is funnier or not is not up to us to decide. But all these differences and particularities do not transform us into the 'aliens' of Europe and we should not allow the 'others' to use these stereotypes against us.

Very often one hears the topic of a Balkan mentality. "Take Orthodox Christianity and Balkan people's common experience within the Ottoman Empire as the basic parameters in defining and explaining a Balkan mentality or cultural community".⁶⁴ The explanation of Detrez and Plas for the many similarities in Balkan literature, in beliefs, customs and practices is contamination or osmosis. The cultural identity in the Balkans is the result of convergences in the region and the mentality could be the result of the intensive contact and interactions within the region, but despite the common historical background, we cannot speak about individual behavioral traits that make us very different from the other Europeans. If this Balkan cultural identity really exists- and I think it does- let us just take it as it is.

To be from the Balkans or not has lately become a question of choosing between West and East, not in geographical terms, but in terms of rationality, economic survival and access to sophisticated services. "Europe continues to be regarded as a civilized model and as a general value system assessed in quite broad categories"⁶⁵ If the influence of the Ottoman Empire in the region was big, and we cannot deny it, we should not ignore the influence of the West either. If we take only Romania as an example, the traces of Turks in the western part of the country are just as great as the traces of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Maybe Ottoman rule was, to a certain extent, a unifying factor, but we cannot see the region as a whole, as each country has its own characteristics. The mixture of commonalities with the particular is different in each country. Even if some characteristics are applicable for a lot (but not all) of the Balkan countries, I am against generalizing. The use of terms such as 'the Balkans are...', is, to some extent,

⁶⁴Raymond Detrez and Pieter Plas, "Convergence and Divergences in the Development of Balkan Identity", in *Developing Cultural Identity in the Balkans*, New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 2005, p. 12.

⁶⁵Irina Bokova, "Integrating Southeastern Europe into the European Mainstream", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 2, (2002), p. 27.

wrong. It would be like saying ‘the Africans or the Asians are...’ Of course there are common traits, nobody can deny it. But each country has its own identity and own characteristics. That we, the Romanians, have more in common with the Turks than with the British people, or that the Bulgarians have more in common with the Turks than with the French might have a historical explanation, but that does not make us one common folk. Finally, the motto of the European Union is ‘United in Diversity’, so if we adhere to European values, why should Europeans have something against our values?

If we lend an ear to the stereotypes, the Balkan people are doing unacceptable things for other Europeans, but who can decide if it is good or bad? How can someone say if our way is worse than their way? Of course, the critics will answer: because they are more developed than you. This fact cannot be denied. The aim of presenting some of the Balkan characteristics here was to show that keeping our ‘Balkan mentality’ and also taking over some of the ‘European values’ is not a contradictory fact. Moreover, as I mentioned at the beginning, we cannot really separate Europe into the Balkans and the rest; we cannot state clear borders. In an era of globalization, the connections between cultures are increasing. So, although we can speak about a Balkan identity and characteristic traits, they are no longer limited to a strict area. Through music, architecture, cuisine, the Balkan features are spreading. Mobility also means exchange. Finally, the goal of the European Union is not to mold the member states into a condition of non-identity, but to make us diverse and united at the same time, which means to work together for peace and prosperity, and that means that the many different cultures, traditions and languages must find a way of peaceful cooperation.