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'Balkanism' as Discourse(s) of Power(lessness). Towards the Questionability of Narrativism

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Abstract

The intention of this paper is to review the historical presuppositions of the absence of the indigenous self-naming of the Balkans, and to illuminate the consequences of external practices, mainly western of "producing" of Balkan identity - through Balkanist discourse of power. But to achieve this it is not enough to point out that the external construction of the narrative of the Balkans is often motivated by the domination interests, which is why we try to understand, and partly to bring into question, the theoretical assumptions of reduction identity to narratives, which is commonplace in today's social sciences.

Keywords: Balkans, West, identity, narrative, representation, realism.



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Introduction

This paper deals with three different issues. Firstly, how was it possible for the Westerners to construct the “Balkans” as they have been constructing it for two hundred old years, this serving not solely in the West but also throughout the world as the authoritative perception about the Balkan region, its culture and peoples? The discursive practice of constructing the Balkans identity for the purposes of this paper will be called (Western) “Balkanism”. Secondly, how come that the “Balkanites” have not done anything to “deconstruct” this mainly negatively connoted construction; and also how was it possible that not even before the 19th century, when a negative conceptive scheme of the Balkans solidified, nor have they ever afterwards been able to set up themselves differently in terms of identity construction? Thirdly, if the Balkans actually is an example of successful practice of (outside) constructing the cultural identity of a region, one wonders whether such a practice is subject to universalization. Therefore, the present paper will also try to shed light on something that in recent decades has almost become a matter of theoretical self-evidence – that identity, especially a collective one, almost exclusively stands for a matter of construction.

Constructing Balkan Identity

In today’s humanities and social sciences there is quite an influential thesis of identity being a matter of narrative construction whereby effectively acting identities are often established by means of narrative self-constructions. In this regard, for example, one of the most prominent 20th century philosophers, at the same time a proponent of narrative constructivism, Paul Ricoeur, says the following:

“The identity of a group, a culture, a people, nation is neither an identity of unchangeable substance nor a solid structure but that of a narrated tale.”¹

Identity is certainly subject to narration but it is rather questionable if it can be told completely, whether it can be reduced to discourse as fully expressible, since after all it always carries grains of mere givens and also of affective-emotional traits, which generally speaking fail to be told. Therefore, as surpassing the words, it could be advisable to speak on identity as a sort of realistic, multi-layered, but still open-ended structure. The intention of Ricoeur’s identity narrativization is to evade it being conceptualized as an ontic structure which resides in potentiality but instead, for the sake of its radical desubstantialization strives to reduce it solely to *acts of identification*. It is certainly possible that identity is (“infinitely”) talked about and still not to be “entirely” described – although it is not in itself “infinite” but rather stands for a *definitive structure*. Narrating encompasses identity, expresses it to an extent, but identity itself is nonpareil to the tale due to differences in the logical structure of narration, on the one hand, and idiosyncrasies of constructing identity devices, which in themselves, in addition to its intelligible side, also bear traits of mere factuality; and being such, it cannot be appropriately drawn in plain sight through verbalization.

However, if even identity itself cannot be reduced to narrative constructions, still the fact of constant constructing of both ones’ own and others identities is beyond doubt. Certainly, when a man/group style themselves as being such and such, it is not as such sufficient for others to accept such self-invention at once. Therefore, in addition to “self-inventiveness”, it is necessary to muster enough strength, power, skill, prowess... So, for example, there is an self-construction of the Englishmen as gentlemen, which was

¹ Paul Ricoeur, „Welches neue Ethos für Europa?“, p. 113.

primarily a construct of one class of English society which was subsequently, partly spontaneously, transposed in “out of Island” context to an *a priory* perception of the English nation. Of course, it is not necessary to stress that the presumption of typical “gentlemanhood” – be it of ruling class or of the entire nation, any nation, be in inner or outer social framework – is hard to reconcile with historical experience. An ethical uniformity of entire nation or class is hardly imaginable. And the USA, on their part, have styled themselves as “the land of freedom”, although one has witnessed so many times, let’s say, “exceptions”.

Apparently, in some cases for the self-inventions of cultures, are widely accepted outside the realms of their original occurrence. The question rises how this did not work out for the “Balkanites”? Is this because they are inherently “weak” and did not have enough strength to impose their self-conception to the rest of the world? No, because the *primary* self-perception of Balkan peoples – all along recent times when some of them, usually due to stigma imposed from outside factors (e.g. the Serbs) or issues with recognizing their own self-naming (e.g. the Macedonians) seek refuge in “Balkanhood” – did in no way relate to it but to their respective national frameworks. In the Balkans there were no Balkanites as the “Balkanites” – until they were “informed” of that from outside, that is, until others *invented* them, establishing them as the “Balkantes”, and newly some of them as “Western Balkanites”. Naturally, once this establishing is made, as soon as one confirms one’s power over the symbolic-referential framework which governs construction of identity of particular space and groups, it subsequently comes easy, to shuffle and re-deal (identity) “cards” again, at one’s own discretion.

The so-called “Balkan identity”, whose “existence” out of discourse, to put it mildly, is dubious, was not the subject of explicit imaginary efforts of the Balkan nations themselves. Accordingly, once they were told that they belonged to the “Balkanites”, there was nothing they could do but find in the “basket” of “Balkanhood” which was not by the others placed there. And how do things look when it comes to national self-constructions of the Balkan nations. All Balkan nations have their own perceptions of themselves, which, understandably enough indicate rather a one-sided self-esteem than unbiased attitude. Nevertheless, it is interesting enough how those self-constructions in some cases resonate very well in the West – but only if being in line with the West’s long-term interests and intentions to rearrange the Balkan region. It is then possible, for one and the same people either to be placed in negative imagery framework of Balkanism, or to drag it occasionally out of it and present it in a more desirable light, which nevertheless by no means suspends the continuing validity of the “Balkanist” interpretative scheme. This does not mean that the people in question in some other circumstances will not again be re-designed in accordance with “semantic confinement” of Balkanism. The positive self-perception could interfere with positive constructions of certain Balkan peoples in the West, and subsequently circulated in global public communication, solely if standing in accordance with Western interests – and not because of inherent persuasiveness of their self-constructions.² Therefore, depending on current interest constellation, one and the same Balkan people may be depicted in a positive or negative light, accordingly, as being notoriously “Balkanic” or as an welcome “exception” to the Balkan “muddle”. The Balkan people itself has no power of making relevant “decision” on their identity recognition, or can even do next to nothing to contribute to a more favourable outcome, since it has been mostly reduced to a cultural-interpretative *object*.

The Balkan peoples’ identities, or rather what their communicative substitution is, can be successful, i.e. their self-constructions could be accepted outside the Balkans – only provided there is support from influential outside *hetero-constructing* powers. How does one “become”, to pose a naïve

² Thus, for example, in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* from 1997, Greece is not classified as a Balkan country, although the matter is quite obvious in geographical terms. On the other hand, as a result of the Greek economic crisis, which affects a broader European region, the predilection for the Greeks to be “returned” to the imaginative Balkans has revived.

question, an identity-constructing “power”? It is not enough only to repeat something many times and to have sufficient economic and military strength in order for one’s conception to gain appropriate persuasiveness and broadest resonance. The Balkans is, however, apparently, for various reasons, a region of an inherent *imagological weakness*, as a result of which it is extremely dependable on outside inputs. This is the reason why among Balkan peoples is sometimes given almost a mythical significance to creating a “positive picture of itself” in the West. Does the fact that Balkan self-images cannot be accepted in the West without a powerful patron, unlike, for example, self-images of the Irish, Scandinavians or the Portuguese, mean that Balkan self-constructions are utterly unpersuasive or perhaps that the Balkans is geopolitically such an important region that enormous amounts of energy are put into “metropolitan” production images thereof? The process of exchanging, accepting as well as correcting self-perceptions and hetero-perception should in normal case flow spontaneously, so that by means of interaction between them and actual experiences some approximate “truths” of certain groups’ identities with the passage of time solidify. Still, in case of the Balkans that simply did not work out.³

Identity: Reality or Construction?

If there are successful and unsuccessful cases of identity self-construction, and identity hetero-construction, does that mean that ability to impose own “readings”, at times mere fabrications, as identity-related “reality itself”, generally depends on power distribution?

Perhaps one of the fantasies of those who run the world could be to make as widely accepted as possible the conviction that this is so, and accordingly that all efforts to show what the truth on reality itself is, and consequently any *cognitive resistance* to interest-directed, “smooth” production of (other) cultures’ and civilizations’ and groups’ identity are futile – because ostensibly there is simply no any *reality* outside the ruling representations. *Then* every outcry of the oppressed groups, needy or simply the ones who think to see what really is going on in the world, how sometimes even naked lies are used to manipulate groups, classes, peoples, states and civilizations, would be understood as a tragicomic “prattle” of those who do not realize what *nowadays* the “truth” is, actually what the truth of the truth is – and that is that the “truth” is only what institutionalized power says that it is. In addition, in our postmodern times, it has increasingly seemed that the “very reality” is powerless and ineffectual vis-a-vis the strategies of its interest-related representations and that, so to speak, it has become “light”, virtually worthless, and the image thereof has in return become “everything”. That would be a special type of “image” which would decreasingly be an image of something that precedes it, but more a sort of self-image, an image of its own, which ultimately, struggles to abolish its image character and establish itself as (if it were) reality itself, as “image-reality”.

Has *presentia* been abolished in favour of pervasive self-referential, imperial representation, which by “making reality vanish” loses its primary, representative character.⁴ The thesis of narrative identity constructing has a (post)structuralist background according to which before establishing a language code, field of designation and the like, reality as *reality* simply does not exist in any relevant sense. With this the dual paradigm *being–thinking*, that is, the developed dual paradigm transformed into a trialism *being–language–thinking*, is effectively transformed into unitary paradigm in which reality, i.e. the principle of

³ More on the topic see in author’s text: “The Balkans, Europe’s Distant Back Yard”.

⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Fragments*, p. 44/5: “The real does not exist. [...] There is a reality effect [...]. We have only our representations.” But, Baudrillard is, unlike those who “preach” reduction of reality on its discursive representation, well aware of final consequences of “destruction” of reality: “Indeed, the two things goes together: the real is also made up of this possibility of the subject representing itself as such. [...]. [t]here’s not even the possibility for subject of recovering the representational whole. We’re beyond representation, or have fallen back short or it. At any rate, we’re outside it.” (ibid. p. 45).

reality, loses independence whatsoever. Identity can be considered as a self-contained narrative-imagological construction, supposing that the subject reference is devoid of any autonomous content – outside the established, interest-loaded system of reference. The theoretical point of departure of such a way of thinking is that the truth in general has the meaning only as truth *for someone*, which is further connected with anthropocentric position of the man as the measure of all things. However, it turns out that in reality this “measure” is not some humanistic general Man but those structures and authorities which in human interaction impose themselves as the most capable of pushing their perspective as the truth. At the end it turns out that the powerful ones are measure of all things, so that anthropocentrism in praxis emerge as eurocentrism or occidental-centrism. All of the above may lead to conclusion that the perspective on the “subject” is formed through interests of a power-satiated language regime inside of which it is being established, so any sense of purpose which would go beyond its formation within the narrative perspective is excluded.

This unitary scheme Being(-only)-in-narration can work solely when the very narrative correlate does not exist in reality prior to and independently from narration, as is, for example, the case with literature characters and events – *or* where ways are found to prevent acquiring direct information and cognition of a man, phenomenon, cultural area, etc. Then in their place narratizations of them are introduced, and they are getting – for the *primary* (i.e. “metropolitan”) audience, culture – represented only with narration itself, so that otherwise, outside of it, they are effectively nothing; in other words, as such, they are absent from horizon of reality, they are then not mere constructs but “ghosts” of a self-referent imaginary world which refuses to accept their transimaginary sense – not to speak of comparing it to imaginary constructs thereof. Hence, what is at hand here is *absolutizing the fictional identity*, so that real people, nations, cultures have an ontic status similar to imagined literary heroes. Indeed, the members of the group from the “remote” cultures, “marginal life-worlds”, acquire at the end the character of heroes of uncontrolled western fiction.⁵

In short, image, narration (of something) etc. may become *everything* only if and when (its) reality becomes *nothing*.⁶ For example, this is the case with the Balkans, which even when it tries to say something about itself, is denied in his “right to speak”, i.e. the right to present itself – no matter how erroneously, falsely may it perhaps be – but still to say on its own something about itself.⁷ And it was therefore possible for the “Balkans” to get in the West an epistemological status not merely of its *conception* of the region or even its *interpretation*, but to stay as very *reality* of the Balkans. This entirely abolishes reality in favour of the image thereof so that the image, as is the case in conceptive world of “natural” peoples, becomes equal to reality itself. Curiously enough, it turns out that as the reversed side of theories of exclusively image-narrativistic character of identity/reality stand the images that in world-wide communication serves as reality *per se*. Does it mean that one theory/ideology support the other? With the conviction that there is nothing (real) outside narration, structure, language, system, code, by understanding that each object as such is generally established only when placed within already accepted

⁵ Books of Vesna Goldsworthy (*Inventing Ruritania*) and Božidar Jezernik (*Wild Europe*) supply with rich material on that topic. Still, the convenient formulation of the issue we can find by Larry Wolff: “By the same token, real travelers to Eastern Europe brought along and gave free rein for their imaginative and philosophical preconceptions, so that the image that emerged from their accounts was often conditioned by an element of fantasy.” (*Inventing Eastern Europe*, p. 90).

⁶ In similar vein, one can find by Larry Wolff a very brief “definition” of marginal parts of Europe as „the other Europe that waited to become 'known'.” (*Inventing Eastern Europe*, p. 90). The far-reaching dependence on other’s “knowledge” of some regions stands for real marginality, irrelevance of its reality as such.

⁷ An illustrative example of the strategy of denying the “Balkans” the right to speak of itself, of its being reduced to a mute object (from which *logos* is taken away and, accordingly, if the man is a Aristotelian being having *logos* – which has been dehumanised), is the destruction of the Serbian Broadcasting Corporation by NATO bombers in 1999.

frames, it is unthinkingly, albeit with serious theoretical apparatus, basically restored archaic attitude, which cannot differentiate its conceptions of reality from reality itself and which consequently can never wonder about the suitability of its image of reality itself. Culture critics like Adorno, Cassirer and Gehlen had warned decades ago of neo-barbarian reversal of modern Western man, so it should not be surprising, that at the end one of leading currents in nowadays humanistic is getting closer to primal imagery.

Nevertheless, this con-fusion of image and reality should be indicated as an anomaly, an exception rather than a *normal case* based on which a comprehensive theory should be created. In general, reality must be somehow, at least to certain sense, existing also outside from the representational systems, although, admittedly, we could not access it without them. Still, it by no means follows that reality should be left to the mercy of arbitrary conveying and reading of accidental or intentionally created representational systems, as mechanisms of ostensibly sovereign constructing of social sense. If the systems of representing/coding reality cannot be constructed with exact precision because being dependant of some irreducible accidental factors, that does not mean that on this basis no system of representation can be created, on whose suitability, not to say adequacy, to reality one can speak of.

Some guidelines for thinking how to reach certain necessities of cognitive findings despite contingency of cognitive means could, for example, be found in Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology. He attempts to bridge the gap between being and thinking by a form of *pseudo-unitary theoretical paradigm*. This, nevertheless, could not work in monological manner because inside it would not be at work only some “sovereign” thinking, but instead through thinking, as ideally devised, reality itself should be allowed to speak for herself – not as absorbed by representation, but one should „take it as it presents itself“.⁸ So, discourse would surpass itself towards very reality.⁹ Its pattern to that extent, unlike the narrative post-structuralist one and other strong unitary models, is characterised by deliberate *false unitarity*. As a reminder, in early 20th century Husserl commenced a colossal attempt to overcome a dual scheme *reality–thinking* by transforming the process of recognizing and establishing reality into an inner-conscious occurrence. Still, although objectivity is constituted solely as a correlate of consciousness, this *noema*, which is his *terminus technicus*, is not exposed to arbitrariness of *noesa*, i.e. pure thinking.

Once this kind of thinking proceeds with certain objectivity, it exists for it within an already set horizon of expectation of sense (*Sinnerwartung*). That horizon is further a correlate of a factually established representational system, and to that extent must contain some accidental, unexplained, unverified elements, or simply that what is an expression of current identity and mental attitude of the observing subject. Therefore Husserl insists on removing such factual-accidental elements by their so called “bracketing” (*Einklammerung*). At the same time, in the process of interaction between consciousness and *noema*, the former, lead with its *eidetic intuition*, should move in the direction of deepening its initial expectations of sense, by revealing their correlation with empirical content, for which it is believed that corresponds to given *noema*. This would eventually – should the expectation horizon of sense be in line with the intention towards the sense of actual act of conscience – make possible to glance ideal “essences” whose correlates are valid as being *real*. In this, the term *reality* would be constructed in epistemological-methodological terms rather than on the basis of apprehension of the pre-theoretical

⁸ Edmund Husserl, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, p. 18.

⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer. *Truth and Method*, p. 470: “The speculative mode of being of language has a universal ontological significance. To be sure, what comes into language is something different from the spoken word itself. But the word is a word only because of what comes into language in it. Its own physical being exists only in order to disappear into what is said.” Besides, bearing in mind the speculative meaning of German verb *aufheben* in its philosophical use, it would be more accurate to put “in order to overcome itself into what is said” at the end of the citation.

position on what is “real”.¹⁰ This manner of foundation, which connects criteria of comprehensiveness and consistency, serves as a replacement for direct contact with reality, which according to early and late Husserl, due to the thesis of consciousness' absoluteness – is impossible. A particular referential system of cognizance, if not conveniently set up, could not shed additional light on noematic spheres, and therefore should be rejected or rearranged in the process of conscious experience.

Still although Husserl devised subjectivity as purified, i.e. as self-purifying, of all cultural, historical and generally of all given elements, he eventually, in his late phase, realised that not only was it impossible but, just the opposite, in *vicinity* of a cognitive subject, which he termed the *life-world*, should be the factual starting point for acceptable illumination of the world. This vicinity of the life-world, when something is known on the basis of it simply and directly, is the foundation of subject's certainty – which is basically posited outside the representational systems. Moreover, this *tectonic arch-certainty*, what is profoundly there as a kind of “gut” felt *certainty*, is factual, although mostly un-reflected, pre-requisite for any possible (“fruitful”) representational system.¹¹ Still also the late Husserl failed to take in account the linguistic side of representation, which made his contributions vulnerable.

„Building” Identity and (Un)successful Narration

Following this theoretical introduction, we are now in a position to pose the question is there such a thing as “Balkan identity”? It makes sense to talk about separate Balkan peoples' identities – however we may determine this term conceptually, but not necessarily about a *super-Balkan identity* as such. It is rather allowed to speak of *regional typicality*, just like one can talk about Central European, Scandinavian, British or Iberian typicality. And typicalities are, for their part, halfway between the “pseudo-substantial” *Identitarian* core and something which is entirely singular, accordingly pure factual. They serve as an epistemological means of self-identifying, that is hetero-perception, which is important in everyday reflexive orientation. As a matter of fact no collective pseudo-essences correspond to them. At first we recognise other's collective identities through a perception of typicality they give off, but by cataloguing such typicalities no core of collective identities can be reached.

When can one know that it is acceptable on basis of recognised typicalities to speak about the presence of some sort of collective identity? Only if it is possible to phenomenologically confirm a coherent, auto-interpretative fruitful *we-sense* of persons belonging to a certain group, which constitutes their primary collective self-identification. A student cannot reach collective *identities* directly, except perhaps – but even though to an limited extent, in his own case, but only through observing *identifications*. corresponding them. This means that if an identity is to assert, it has to express itself through respective identifications, while it is impossible to do the same in the opposite direction, since there are plenty of mere situational, random identifications which are not an indicator of any identities that would underlie them. One could finally say,

¹⁰ Edmund Husserl, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, p. 37: “And this In-itself comes to givenness. And yet it is in principle never given in an absolute way. Its meaning is always only an opinion in the sense that it always stands in need of evidence that can never be given definitively. And consequently, the Being-In-Itself of a thing is, in regard to knowledge, also always a presumption, insofar as we never really get rid of the experiential consciousness. [...] In thoughtful experiencing, something is posited for which the being-experienced is in itself contingent...”

¹¹ Edmund Husserl, *Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man*, p. 10: “The investigator of nature, however, does not make it clear to himself that the constant foundation of his admittedly subjective thinking activity is the enviroing world of life. This latter is constantly presupposed as the basic working area, in which alone his questions and his methodology make sense.”

where ever one can speak on an identity, it addresses corresponding identifications as an answer does a question.

Let us once more revisit the thesis of narrative identity creation, but now in more practical context. If identity is simply a matter of narration, if it straightforwardly produces identities, then, presumably, if sufficient “narrative effort” is put into it – a corresponding identity should emerge. Still, to give an example, when the dismantlement of the Eastern communist bloc was the objective, plenty of intellectual (and not only) energy was invested in – here it is quite suitable to use the term without any hesitancy whatsoever – the *construction* of the Central Europe identity (*Mittleuropa*), which for her part allegedly was ruthlessly oppressed under alien “Orthodox”, “Mongolian”, “semi-oriental”...(so polemical narratives of the time, mostly among writers) – in a nutshell, Soviet Russia. Nevertheless, when the Cold War was over by one side winning and particular parts of Europe joining the Western alliance, the “production” of Central European narrations went quiet nearly overnight. Even the Germans mention less frequently a one-time favourite, so called “Eastern Central Europe”, as the object of their continuous expansionistic aspirations since Middle Ages. The reason for this is quite obvious. Former non-Russophone Eastern Europe was absorbed into the Euro-Atlantic world, while the Germans’ exclusive interest zone east of their borders was not recognized. So the so called “Central European identity” became redundant for everyone, even for those who during the 80’s bitterly wept over their sad fate under the “uncultured intruders” from the East.¹² If narrations really produce identities, and more than two decades of serious intellectual efforts in a wide region from Vancouver to Vilnius should absolutely not be underestimated as resource for identity production, how could any of us today overlook the vivid “Central Europeanism”? The problem, however, is that almost no one feels it because one cannot encounter it in one’s memory, in collective emotionality, not to speak intentionality. This example shows that narrations, however rhetorically ardent, at times frenetic, well-coordinated, cannot produce collective (super)identities at will – if some pre-narrative prerequisites are not fulfilled.

Similar to “Central European Identity”, no one on the Balkans feels “Balkan identity”, but unlike Central Europe, production of its identity is not over. The question is – why? Because of successful integration of Central Europe in Western world, which failed on Balkans? Then identity production has more to do with appropriation of particular cultural space than with its theoretical interpretation. In that case one can only wonder if production of Balkan is expression of frustration because of its failed integration into the West, or is it rather the means of the integration, or even perhaps a way to keep the region permanently out?

Narration can serve the purpose of generating, or better: stabilizing, identity if among the population of a region *already* exists a kind of *we*-sense, encouraging the weaving of corresponding *we*-narrations. In order to be born, this sense in most cases requires a single, exceptional event which would later be reconstructed as source of that *we*-sense.¹³ It is therefore not accidental that almost all national myths insist on identifying such formative events. The national myth is a tale of an event that initiated our “*we*-ness”. In cases when they are non-existing, they simply need to get invented, not to say fabricated. Nevertheless, the key point is that collective identities have an *event-related, pre-narrative pretext*, a kind of complex occurrence, followed only then by self-observation, self-understanding and narrative *consolidation* of identity. So there could be no mention of an arbitrary narrative production of collective identities *ex nihilo*, which is nowadays believed by many, including some theoreticians.

¹² More on topic to find in: Jacques Rupnik, “Central Europe or Mittleuropa?”.

¹³ Anthony D. Smith, “National Identity and the Idea of European Unity”, p. 60 f.

How is it possible that some narrations get crystallized to the identity stage, while the others do not have that same power; why do they generate less stable identity-like structures, while third ones, which are the vast majority, do not produce anything seemingly stable? In short, with the *theorem* of narrative identity construction of collective identities, it is unclear how can one in principle differentiate (potentially) constitutive from (potentially) non-constitutive narrations. This would be more preferable than only a *posteriori* to determine that some narrations happened to be factually successful while others were not.

Besides, are constitutive/“successful” narrations different from non-constitutive/“unsuccessful” ones in respect of the level of their conclusiveness, persuasiveness, brilliance, imaginativeness? That is hardly the case, because, back to the already mentioned example of the discursive production of “Central Europe”, it was worked on by many great minds on both sides of the “Iron curtain”, and still there is nothing left than a *mere tale*, so, nothing more than a conglomerate of *identity devoid narrations* which increasingly slip into oblivion. On the other side, once we get familiar with some of the empirically known, institutionalized national and other collective narratives, it can be seen that even a rather “idle (identitarian) talk” can be efficient. Obviously it seems very hard to work out the criteria for separation of successful from unsuccessful narrations. The contingency of emerging of collective identities is hardly to avoid even at the level of its theoretical reflection, which does not mean it is impossible to “control” them reflexively.

At the end it seems that the ultimate objective consequence, although not necessarily the subjective intention, of discourse about the narrative construction of identities is just a conviction of inseparability of correct from incorrect discourse of collective entities, as supposedly real – because of lack of possibility to compare narration with reality itself.¹⁴

The “Balkans” or the History of Failed Self-Naming

Everything that exists needs to be named, and if one individual or group does not name oneself as a part of reality, it will inevitably be named by others. Today, when the “Balkans” is already “here” and well-known to everybody, the discourse of the “Balkans” is hardly to avoid – in the very *Balkans* and outside it. However, in doing this, it is desirable to stay within the limits of the theoretically fruitful and acceptable. But what is theoretically acceptable when speaking of something in such an emotional, historical but also erroneous and malicious discourse of it as a contaminated concept as Balkans is, it is not always easy to make out, especially being in the midst of confusion created by the primary ideological discourse of the Balkans. Undeniably, foreigners have not only ascribed but also imposed on the “Balkans” the name as well as provided a corresponding denotation and thus charged it with notions, imagery and emotions which, in line with their respective interests, as well as their own discretion, arbitrariness or simply miscomprehension, they read into. It is likely that the probability for that would have been somewhat slighter if the inhabitants of South Eastern Europe had timely named themselves, and then possibly made some, even a provisional sketch of their own identity, as the first step, which should be clearly also a move towards *identity self-protection*. Nevertheless, why did this not happen?

Let us here take a historical look. For its pre-modern inhabitants, the “Balkans” is a continental hinterland of coast – which are, accidentally, the cradle of Greek-European culture – and it never, up until

¹⁴ Rorty, one of the protagonists of narrativism, emphasize even that narrativism as such is to read as anti-theoretical turn: “general turn against theory and toward narrative” (Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, p. XVI). That this turn away from theory is not just casually spoken is confirmed with a further citation: “Ironist theory must be narrative in form because the ironist’s nominalism and historicism will not permit him to think of his work as establishing a relation to real essence; he can only establish a relation to the past.” (ibid. 101).

modern times, was in terms of domicile self-perception integrated in a single, comprehensive region, within the imagery world neither of “Balkanites” nor non-“Balkanites”. The ancient Macedonians, although they were Hellenophone, were perceived by the Classical Greeks as barbarian intruders who from relative depths, for as much “geopolitically” uninteresting as culturally despised continent called “Europe”, bargaged towards their “beloved” coasts.¹⁵ And the Ancient Greeks, for their part, perceived themselves as coastal people rather than “peninsular” one.¹⁶ This is why ancient times do not know any semantic, let alone any symbolic-topological or cultural-identity analogon to today’s “Balkanites”. Unlike some other European imperial nations, for which their (pen)insular geography constituted part of their national consciousness (Romans, Spaniards, British), that was not the case with the Greeks. They were and remained a Mediterranean, coastal people that was not only not interested for conquering the depths of mainland, with the exception of the magically attractive Orient, but that also neglected the continental heartland of Europe. Not even later, as the Byzantines, did they see themselves either as the “Balkan” or even “Anatolian” empire, since they were the successors of the empire created by *Romaioi* (the Romans, in Greek). *Stara planina* (the “Old Mountain”), in today’s Bulgaria, after which the peninsula was actually named *balkan* (Turkish word for mountain in general), was called Hemos by the Greeks, and accordingly the Byzantines called the entire peninsula the “Hemos peninsula”. Nevertheless, the entity corresponding to this term in the Romaic symbolic geography was of limited significance.

That could be confirmed from the fact that this name, indicatively enough, never took root, was never generally known as designation for the peninsula. If that had been the case, probably (some) Westerners since the 19th century till present day would have been somewhat constrained in mapping and ruling Europe’s easternmost peninsula with arbitrary naming. On the one hand, the “Balkanites”, as already mentioned, did not recognize themselves as “Balkanites” because in their symbolic world the peninsula was even not perceived as a single geographic-cultural unit, nor did they perceive themselves as the inhabitants thereof. All along modern times the gap between the “civilized” (at least in the past) Greek south of the peninsula and the rest, perceived as “barbarian” north, has survived. Additionally, none of those northern, ultimately Balkan peoples proper was a people of seafarers. Hence, for the Greeks/Byzantines, territories north of them were insignificant in cultural terms, however not always in military terms as well, while other peoples from the area never moved sufficiently off the coast of the Peninsula (Serbs and Bulgarian in the Middle ages created only continental, not maritime empires) thus making it possible for them to originally mentally perceive it as a single peninsula, in which case there would have been a more prominent need for its geographical determination. On the contrary, they barely survived for centuries within closed continental horizons, so for the majority of the “Balkanists”, up until modern times, the Balkans was seen primarily as a continent, rather than a peninsula.

But how come that the lack of name for south-eastern Peninsula lasted so long without being noticed? The issue of (failure to) name Europe’s easternmost peninsula *geographically* was “smoke screened” by it being called *politically* “European Turkey”, after its then master. If the Ottomans had any other more substantial lands in Europe – and from Southern Russia/“Little Russia”, including Crimea, they were banished by the second half of the 18th century – then there would not have been the coincidence between the so called “European Turkey” and the ancient “Hemoic peninsula”, and in that case even the need to name the region more specifically would have arisen sooner. But being so, all the time till the

¹⁵ More on the topic in: Costa Carras, “Greek identity”, p. 303.

¹⁶ A striking proof of this are spontaneous outbursts of enthusiasm (with shouts of “Sea, sea!” of hugging each other and crying soldiers) when the Greek army 401 years B.C. climbed the mountain Theches and saw the southeastern coast of the Black Sea, no matter how far it was from their homeland. (Xenophon, *Anabasis* IV, VII, 20–26; p. 331).

modern age, when its perception changed, decreasingly bearing ancient-middle age symbolic layers of ecumenical and imperial, and increasingly gets seen in more exact terms as a strategic, and ultimately geopolitical, region, the random historic-cultural name “European Turkey” becomes unsatisfactory – even because it became clear that Turkish presence in Europe did not have to last forever. That is primarily why it was absolutely necessary to come up with a name that would be generally accepted.

For all those reasons it was inevitable for the region to be named from outside when modern times were about to commence, and subsequently to reach the Balkans itself. For sure, countries and stateless territories in the Balkans would not have been spared being treated as an object for international relations even if they had inherited from the past widely used and accepted self-naming – because only possession of strength, followed by solid cultural self-consciousness, can prevent it. Nevertheless, space for the instrumental, sometimes cynical “Balkanistic”, that is the ideological representation of the Balkans, which disguised the corresponding treating of the Balkans by Westerners, would have probably been lesser. And consequently, the politics of power (Machtpolitik) directed toward the Balkans which is often hidden behind do-gooder endeavor to “Europeanise”¹⁷ “semi-barbaric” South-East European peninsula, would have been somewhat more transparent and consequently probably less successful. But being as it is, by accepting this naming, through which is “smuggled” also fairly negative, equally by interests and ignorance charged “luggage”, many of the inhabitants of the unfortunate “Balkans” involuntarily, and nowadays increasingly voluntarily, accept and adopt the main stream interpretation of geography, culture and mentality related patterns of reasoning and behavior of the Balkanites, which are invented and imposed from outside.¹⁸ For as long as this is the case, for as long as conceptions of people from the Balkans region are run by others, for as long their self-consciousness “resides” someplace else, so that their self-understanding is not the fruit of their own self-relation – in the Balkans it will not be possible to generate authentic cultural-historical self-consciousness of neither national elites nor peoples themselves, while the occident-centric “Balkanist discourse” will continue to serve as a powerful, in its subversiveness mainly unfathomed tool of alien domination.

If it wants to be liberated, in discursive terms, of the “Balkans” shackles, the real Balkans needs to start independently producing self-interpretation of its cultural-symbolic space – as all national particularities encompassing, and not only their respective national identity narrations, which by the way were frequently annulled because of being mutually antagonistic, and as a result produced suspicion concerning them even to well-intentioned individuals outside the Balkans and finally, to a certain extent, to individuals and groups in the very Balkan nations. If it wants to get rid of the “Balkans” stigma imposed by

¹⁷ German philosopher Liebsch, by introducing the term “counter-Europeanization”, apparently in the tradition of the German critique of enlightenment, which was termed as “counter-enlightenment” (Gegenaufklärung), indirectly warns of the perils of monopolising the term, and then of the practice of Europeanizing: „It is exactly this threatening fate that should start the efforts against counter-Europeanization, which has become a “European problem” specifically because any other kind of Europeanization would mutually rip European ancestry and European future.” Old Europe is, accordingly, as a result of temporalized rationalization of life relations, unilaterally Europeanized. Against this a different kind of Europeanization is turned, it reminding of ancestry defying the former“ (Burkhard Liebsch, „Über einige Schwierigkeiten, Europas Europäisierung[en] zu denken“, p. 63).

¹⁸ Even those scholars, as Serbian geographer and anthropologist Jovan Cvijić [Yovan Tsviyich] who got his prominence in first decades of 20th century, besides striving with much success to overcome the intellectual immaturity of the Balkan elites, confirmed, though unintentionally, the outside construction of Balkan's identity with his famous saying that Serbs “built their house in the midst of highway”. Those who live on the road – and road livers always live on some other's road – are doomed not to have peace in their house, perhaps not to finish their own house ever – if house metaphorically stands for identity. So the Balkans as *roadside world* is destined not to be completed as a self-contained one, but rather to stay in status of perpetual immaturity of transitional in-betweenness.

the “Balkanist discourse”, the Balkans needs to start speaking of itself as the *Balkans*, since the “discursive Balkans” is a narrative reality that can be put in a more realistic framework only with different, well-considered, and as much as it is possible, more honest interpretations, but not mere counter-narratives.

It is an entirely different issue whether this is reasonable to expect, as a consequence of accumulated mutual Balkan hostilities. Western political-historical-cultural discourse of dominance over the Balkans could hardly be so widely accepted – in the Balkans and outside it (as an internal and external *Balkan-noia*) – if the behaviour of relevant players in the South Eastern peninsula was not had been too frequently in accordance with discourse’s “predictions”. But this, again, is in good part because this region is run as if it were an object, to which not insignificantly contributes local interiorizing of such a discourse of power, so that “interpretation” of the current “Balkanist discourse”, whose more than two-hundred-year long tradition continues, emerges as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Still it is jointly worked on not only by the Western discourse and actions of power but also by Balkan client-natured, corrupt political, as well as intellectual elites, which instead of a rational facing with the Balkanist discourse, while being not infrequently immature, proceed with its interiorizing, dissemination and confirmation.

Conclusion

The Balkans as “internally alien” to the West is intellectually and culturally barren for it, it does not enrich him with deeper self-awareness – unlike, say, the ancient Athenian perception of Sparta and Macedon, both as closer or further (inner-Hellenic) otherness –to put aside that fact that such an attitude often do injustice to the “Balkans” itself. Such otherness does not serve to (fertile) self-mirroring, self-understanding, but rather as a symptom, as the epitome of thwarted self-knowledge. Besides, a symptom of something objectively constitutes a sort of exclusively objectivized “knowledge” about it – but in a way that this knowledge is not available to it in reflective manner. Creation of negative value-loaded “Balkans” historically coincides with the exhaustion of the creative abilities of modern European culture – to turns its crisis into prospects for further improvement and progress. When a self-rationally based culture undergo a crisis, then her ability to self-criticism weaken – or remains closed within certain intellectual circles, deprived of a broader impact. She then cease to make use of meeting with others, particularly the close ones, and eventually begins to perceive them primarily as problems and in terms of imagination as depository of negative traits. In doing so, these negative characteristics of others are, as a rule, reversed indication of own problems or own properties. The culmination of such a crisis symptomatology is European totalitarianism of the first half of the XX century, which all the problems of European civilization one-sidedly interpreted in a class or racial key, and subsequently as unique challenge of the Civilization were recognized a class or racial enemy, i. e. certain close, *internal otherness*. Precisely on the same (hetero)cultural foundation stands Balkanist discourse of XIX to XXI century. However, the modern code of “political correctness”, which is mainly formed on the basis of experiences with totalitarianism and other practices of submission and exclusion, simply does not protect the “Balkans” – presumably because Europe is not yet aware of doing ever injustices to it.

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