
UNDERSTANDING THE PAST AND PRESENT OF SOUTH-EAST EUROPEAN SOCIETIES BEYOND WAR, NATIONALISM AND TRANSITION: THE CASE OF POST-COMMUNIST BALKANS

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Abstract

For most of the post- Cold War period, academic approaches to the political and economic evolution of the South-East European societies were dominated by investigations on violence and nationalism. This was the immediate effect of the violent disintegration of former Yugoslavia (1991–2001). In the international public sphere, representations of the South-East European region were largely shaped by discourses that recycled heavily charged and negative perceptions. This has led to a rather important mis-interpretation of the wider political and economic transformation of the region and more importantly of the fact that these transformations did not affect the region collectively and indiscriminately. This paper attempts to highlight the implications of these long- standing perceptions for the study and the discussion of the South-East European region. Furthermore, it examines new trends which could help promote an alternative (self-) perception of the region and thus halt its symbolic exclusion from Europe.

Keywords: *Balkans/South-East Europe, Post-communism, epistemology, discourse, knowledge.*

Introduction

There is little doubt that in the post-Cold War period the Balkan region was re-discovered in the light of the Yugoslav tragedy. This was not the case for other post-Communist states. Central European intellectuals, such as Milan Kundera, understood the fall of Communism in the region as a return to the West (an exit from Eastern Europe). Communism kidnapped Central Europe from its historical connections with the rest of the continent (Kundera 1983: 3–22). The Balkans were different. There, many outside observers selectively evoked a return to troubled

periods of the past, such as the Balkan wars of 1912–1913 and the First World War of 1914–1918. Certainly, the wars of the 1990s and early 2000s had negative effects for the Balkan region as a whole. However, these wars did not expand outside the borders of former Yugoslavia. They did not become *Balkan wars* in a literal sense. It did not matter. For various reasons, discourses that explained the post – Cold War situation in the Balkans via generalizations about the region as a whole proliferated¹. In a broad sense, these discourses regarded and still regard the region as a single entity, as a nexus of interconnected problems, either political or economic, often attributed to political or cultural characteristics shared by its countries. One of the most influential effects of such perceptions is the recycling of the infamous *Balkan exceptionalism*, the idea that despite its progress, the Balkan region constitutes a particular region in Europe, a region which finds it difficult to adjust itself to norms and values associated with the European mainstream.

An important literature has dealt with the pejorative perceptions on the Balkans in the “West” and Western Europe in particular (Allcock and Young 1991, Skopetea 1992, Bakic-Hayden 1995, Todorova 1997, Goldsworthy 1998, Bjelic and Savic 2002). This literature shares important theoretical and methodological premises with Edward Said’s “Orientalism” (1979), notably the treatment of these perceptions as discourse and the understanding of the “Western” construction of otherness as a means of self-valorization. Moreover, the work of Maria Todorova on Balkan stereotypes (1997) and Larry Wolfe on the notion of “Eastern Europe” (1994), has shown that in the European context we can evoke particular constructions of otherness which do not necessarily coincide with a clear West-East dichotomy. In the case of the Balkans, as Maria Todorova demonstrates, Western European perceptions recycle the idea of an incomplete Other, partly European and partly non-European (Todorova 1997). From various points of view, the subject of this paper, the generalizations about the Balkans, tries to apply and expand key aspects of this important literature on the understanding of complex phenomena such as the post-communist transition, the post-conflict situation and also the Euro-Atlantic integration.

This paper argues that these generalizations, observable in media, political and to a lesser extent academic discourse, are not only another manifestation of *Balkanism*, the discourse that, as Maria Todorova has convincingly argued, denigrates the region since the late 19th century (Todorova 1997). They should also be attributed to an incomplete understanding of the evolution of the region in the post-Cold War period and more precisely of the fact that different parts of the region experienced different transformations. On the one hand, the former Yugoslavia underwent a violent transition towards the model of the Nation-state (with the exception of Bosnia)

¹ A very powerful example of such a discourse can be found in George Kennan’s introduction to the 1993 re- publication of the Carnegie Endowment Inquiry on the Balkan wars of 1913. As George Kennan notes: “Well, here we are in 1993. Eighty years of tremendous change in the remainder of Europe and of further internecine strife in the Balkans themselves have done little to alter the problem this geographic region presents for Europe”.

whereas other countries such as Bulgaria, Romania and Albania underwent what we can broadly call a post-communist transition. At the same time, the post-communist transition and the Euro-Atlantic integration was a theme that connected all countries of the region with the exception of Greece. Greece for its part, became a member of the Eurozone in 2001, but since 2010 is traversing a grave economic crisis from which it finds it very difficult to recover.

When the discussion of such a complex set of transformations is effectuated via generalizations, the particularities of a country—mostly negative or problematic—may be ascribed to an abstract Balkan identity, heritage or tradition. From this perspective, the region is regarded as an undifferentiated group of societies and countries without distinctions. In the context of academic discourse, the long-lasting epistemological debates and indecisions among researchers, historians, sociologists and political scientists, concerning what could be called common Balkan identity and culture (Todorova 1997, 2004, Drace-Francis, Bracewell 1999, Fleming 2000, Njara-radi 2012) reflect precisely the effort of the academic community to resist the temptation of generalizations. In more recent years, there are strong signs that scientific research on the Balkans is becoming highly sensitive to the matter, focusing on more comparative and less culturally dependent approaches.

The generalizing discourses in the discussion of the conflicts and the post-conflict transition

Undoubtedly, the media presented and understood the Yugoslav conflicts as Balkan. In their content, the terms Balkans and (former) Yugoslavia have become almost synonymous. Maria Todorova (1997) was one of the first researchers that questioned the insistence of the media to label these conflicts as Balkan, in contrast to their attention not to generalize in other cases². Moreover, key concepts such as instability, crisis, war, nationalism or even war crimes were constantly associated in an abstract manner with the region as a whole, frequently without historical distinctions. In the vast majority of cases, the use of the term Balkan was reserved for developments taking place in former Yugoslavia. It was used very rarely in the discussion of developments in Greece, Romania, Bulgaria and Albania. The term became shorthand for horror and covered the whole region in opprobrium.

This has been a phenomenon observable in different types of media, including highly respected newspapers with international readership. In the period between 1999 and 2004 a period relatively calm compared to the troubled decade of the

² As Maria Todorova notes (1997): “Why does this war need to be Balkan? The Spanish civil war was Spanish, not Iberian or Southwest European; the Greece civil was never Balkan; the problem of Northern Ireland is fittingly localized – it is called neither Irish, nor British, not even English, which it precisely is. Why is it, then, that ‘Balkan’ is used for a country at war that, before the sad events, insisted it was not Balkan and was previously not labeled as Balkan but considered to be the shining star of Eastern Europe by its supporters?”

1990s- newspapers such as *Le Monde*, *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* present the following results as to the association of the term Balkans with countries of the region: *Le Monde* – 38% for countries of former Yugoslavia and 7% for the other countries altogether, *The Guardian* – 45% and 7 % and the *New York Times* – 49% and 4 % (Paschalidis 2012: 481)³. One may argue that this association came naturally due to the continuous attention of the media to the developments in former Yugoslavia. However, a close examination of these references demonstrates that in many cases the use of the term Balkans is excessive and emerges from an unusual tendency to generalize. Two articles of the *New York Times*, published in November 2007, epitomize this attitude. The first one is entitled ‘‘Balkans’ idolatry delights movie fans and pigeons’’ (November 11, 2007). The article reports on the decision of Serbian and Bosnian towns to put Hollywood cultural icons, such as Rocky Balboa, on a pedestal. However, the title and parts of the text give the impression that this is a generalized phenomenon in the Balkan region⁴.

The following day, an editorial of the newspaper entitled ‘‘Again and again in the Balkans’’ analyzes the implications of fresh trouble in Kosovo (November 12, 2007). It begins as follows: ‘‘The Balkans have a dismal way of living up to their stereotype as a region of ancient, intertwined and irreconcilable feuds’’. While such passages may not invalidate the quality of information provided by *The New York Times* on the Balkans in the post-Cold War period, they highlight the powerful and excessive perceptions which are counterproductive to a better and more balanced understanding of both the former Yugoslavia and the Balkan region. There are numerous examples that this type of inappropriate association between the Balkans and former Yugoslavia is still quite frequent in media content⁵. What is problematic in this identification is precisely the fact that some of the most important historical specificities of former Yugoslavia are underestimated. We are referring to its constitution and preservation as a multi-national state for the biggest part of the 20th century. This was in sharp contrast to the paradigm of the Nation-state which marked the evolution of the other countries of the region. During the Yugoslav wars, the absence of this distinction ultimately helped to regenerate the idea and the impression of a Balkan region indifferently ravaged by antagonistic nationalist passions.

³ These figures concern the totality of articles found in the three newspapers with reference to the Balkan region and its countries. In other words, the term Balkans has been used – roughly speaking – in half of these articles.

⁴ A very indicative passage of the article is the following: ‘‘In a phenomenon that is either delighting or alarming cultural critics, monuments to icons of Hollywood and popular culture are sprouting across the Balkans, after almost a decade of bloodshed and vengeance that killed as many as 125,000 people in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo’’

⁵ See for example the following articles: ‘‘Why are the Balkans boiling again? The Bosnian protests reflect sociopolitical dynamics that are going on not only in the Balkans but the whole of Europe’’ (Srećko Horvat, Al Jazeera World, February 12, 2014), and ‘‘Have we learned nothing from the nineties? Syria is the Balkans all over again’’ (Radwan Ziadeh, The New Republic, March 22, 2012)

Misha Glenny, a British journalist who covered the Yugoslav wars and then became an historian of the Balkans, provides a powerful insight into the longevity of pejorative views on the Balkans in media content. He argues that for some reason Western journalists did not treat the Balkans with the same care for political correctness as with other troubled parts of the world (Glenny 1999: xi)⁶. In the context of Maria Todorova's theory about Balkanist discourse, such views confirm a long-lasting predisposition for the use of stereotypes with regard to the Balkans. Our analysis of media content shows that very often this tendency is founded on the general idea that the Balkans form a region of peoples and societies not easily distinguishable from one another and a region whose common character is evoked mainly in the discussion of problematic phenomena.

In the case of academic discourse, the effect of similar generalizations has been much weaker. In many cases, the use of the term refers primarily to the general interest of a study or research and not its actual content or substance. For instance, in the voluminous bibliography dealing with former Yugoslavia and the Balkans in the 1990s and the 2000s, we find numerous works which refer to the Balkans in their title whilst the deal mostly with former Yugoslavia and its countries⁷. On the other hand, we note the emergence of a vast bibliography which deals with issues such as political history, nationalism and intercultural relations in the context of the region as a whole. Occasionally, we find excessive generalizations. Paul Garde (2004: 8), a French linguist and historian of Yugoslavia and the Balkans, introduced the notion of "Balkan discourse", a special category of discourse, whose principal trait is the denigration of the Other and the exaltation of one's own nation in the Balkans; in other words a discourse marked by nationalist antagonism⁸.

This notion serves the effort of Paul Garde to stress the difference in the concept of the nation that dominates in the Balkans (the ethnic concept) and the concept found in Western parts of Europe (the civic concept), something which may explain the longevity of nationalism in the region. As we know, there is a general consensus

⁶ As Misha Glenny notes: "As Yugoslavia began to disintegrate in 1989, generalizations about the peoples who inhabit the region, and their histories, were spread by media organizations that had long ago outlawed such clichés when reporting from Africa, the Middle East or China. The Balkans apparently enjoy a special exemption from the rules against stereotyping."

⁷ We could refer to the following examples amongst many: "Le retour des Balkans" (Stephane Yerasimos 2002), "International justice in Rwanda and the Balkans" (Victor Peskin 2008), "Peacebuilding in the Balkans, the view from the ground floor" (Paula Pickering 2007), "Western intervention in the Balkans, the strategic use of emotion in conflict" (Roger Petersen 2011), "War and change in the Balkans, Nationalism, conflict and cooperation" (Brad Blitz 2006) and "The Balkans" (Watkins Clem 2003).

⁸ As Paul Garde notes: "This discourse is not singular. All peoples of the region have their own, there is an Albanian, a Bosnian, a Croat, a Greek (...) They are incompatible with one another and violently antagonistic. We should refer to a Balkan cacophony. (...) Their common trait is that they try- often without admitting it- to exalt a Nation (or a people, a Nation, a state or a country) at the expense of every other."

that the late creation of Nation- states in the Balkans (19th and early 20th centuries) as well as the absence of state traditions in the context of the multi-national and multi-confessional Ottoman Empire, are two factors that help explain the antagonistic nature of Balkan nationalisms. Nevertheless, this analysis seems more appropriate for the late 19th century (the intensification of the Eastern crisis) or the Balkan wars of 1912- 1913. In Paul Garde's notion, nationalism becomes a quasi-anthropological trait specific to the Balkan region and its countries. Once again, one may argue that such a vision somewhat mystifies the understanding of both the former Yugoslavia and the Balkan region via a perception of an intertemporal and transnational uniformity.

At a general level, it is certain that the Yugoslav wars intensified the study of the Balkan region and thus regenerated the correspondent scientific interest in various fields. A great deal of pertinent work has come about. Another significant development regards the reaction of numerous historians and researchers against the cultural stereotyping of the Balkans. This is the case for historians such as Mark Mazower, Stevan Pavlowitch, Misha Glenny, Robert Bideleux and Ian Jeffries⁹.

The generalizing discourses in the discussion of the post-communist transition

In the context of the discourses on the post- communist transition, the generalizing effect has been both explicit and implicit. Two of its most explicit and recurring manifestations have been the notions of *reconstruction* and *Europeanization*. In the media, Europeanization has been used more frequently, whereas reconstruction was used primarily during the period following the end of the war in Kosovo (Paschalidis 2012: 20–32). It is noteworthy that the media, in this instance the newspapers, never really defined their terms. One can only deduce that their application regarded the region as a whole and in an abstract manner. There were other cases where the notion of reconstruction was applied in its literal sense, especially when it came to the implementation of specific projects in countries such as Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo and the FYR of Macedonia. What is important is that the media never questioned the deeper meaning of such notions: the idea that the Balkan region constituted a complex nexus of interconnected problems that needed to be addressed.

⁹ Apart from the highly influential work of Maria Todorova "Imagining the Balkans", one should also refer to the work of Vesna Goldsworthy "Inventing Ruritania, the Imperialism of the imagination" (1998) and the works of Dusan Bjelic "Balkan as metaphor, between globalization and fragmentation" (2005, with Obrad Savic) and "Normalizing the Balkans, geopolitics of psychoanalysis and psychiatry" (2011). These are works that deal specifically with the issue of the popular representations and long-lasting stereotypes about the Balkans.

Such a disposition was particularly observable during 1999, in the aftermath of the war in Kosovo, even in cases where there wasn't any explicit reference to reconstruction and Europeanization. For instance an article published in *The Guardian* in July 1999, casted doubt on the possibility of the West to *buy peace, prosperity and democracy in the Balkans*¹⁰. This disposition can be better understood in the context of the Kosovo war, when once again the Balkans were largely presented and understood as a site of permanent trouble for Europe. It was another example of excessive generalization, probably instigated by references of powerful political figures such as Bill Clinton, Jacques Chirac and Tony Blair, the presidents of the United States and France and the prime minister of Britain at the time, who all stressed the need for a reconstruction of the Balkans and the normalization of the region according to European values¹¹. The discussion about the need for a vague *Balkan reconstruction* has been a very strong indication of the way in which the *post-conflict* and the *post-communist* transitions in the Balkans were mixed together as relative parameters of the same issue, the problematic relations of the Balkans with Europe.

It is significant that the idea of a Balkan reconstruction started to emerge in media content in the discussion of the post-war situation in Bosnia¹². Progressively, it was applied to the region as a whole, mainly on the basis of information provided by US and European officials¹³. Until 1999, the idea of a general plan for Balkan reconstruction had been much more present in media content, mainly in the context of political discourse. For instance, in April 1999, Madeleine Albright, the US Secretary of state, declared: "We must concern ourselves more broadly with the future of the region. Our explicit goal should be to transform the Balkans from Europe's primary source of instability into an important part of its mainstream"¹⁴. With the inauguration of the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe, the international and EU effort to address Balkan problems in a general manner, took a specific form. From

¹⁰ Here are some revealing passages from the article by Polly Toynbee: "How do you get any unity in the Balkans when all the countries hate each other? (...) Peace, prosperity and democracy in the Balkans may not be easy to buy, but without large sums there's no chance". (*The Guardian*, July 14, 1999)

¹¹ See for that matter the declarations of Bill Clinton, Jacques Chirac and Tony Blair on the occasion of the end of the war in Kosovo on June 10–11, 1999 and during the Sarajevo summit on July 29, 1999.

¹² For a detailed analysis on the emergence of the notion of Balkan reconstruction see Paschalidis 2012, pp. 20–32.

¹³ See for that matter the following article by John Tagliabue published by the *New York Times* on October 7, 1995: "Talks in Rome Look to Helping Balkans recover from War". An indicative passage of the article: "The discussions were also directed toward lining up commitments for financial aid to promote economic reconstruction of the region. Mr. Holbrooke, speaking at a news conference after the talks, stressed that economic assistance involved the entire Balkan region, including countries not involved in the fighting, like Albania".

¹⁴ Katherine Q. Seelye, "Allies seek a way to promote prosperity in restive Balkans". *The New York Times*, April 21, 1999.

2000 and onwards, the notion of Balkan reconstruction becomes much less present in media content. The same applies for the notion of Europeanization.

The post-communist transition in the Balkans was never treated with the same attention by the media. Thus, it seems that for the most of the 1990s and early 2000s, the media never really tried to distinguish between a post-communist and a post-conflict transition in the Balkans, since the region, as a whole, was seen as a problem. Once again, it becomes obvious the extent to which the urgent developments in former Yugoslavia shaped the general understanding of the region's evolution in the post-Cold War era.

In the context of scientific discourse, the notions of reconstruction and Europeanization were certainly present in the vast literature investigating the post-communist transition since the mid and late 1990s. Even today, one finds frequent use of the notion of Europeanization¹⁵. We should distinguish two periods within the use of these terms. The first regards most of the 1990s. During this period the analysis on post-communist transition was a constant subject of interest for those writing the political history of the Balkan region. Less attention was paid to the characteristics of the communist rule in countries such as Bulgaria, Romania and Albania. Numerous works emerged dealing with the general issue of Balkan reconstruction whose contents wrestle with the political and economic evolution of Balkan countries. They lack, however, a unifying idea explaining the joint treatment of the post-conflict and post-communist transitions¹⁶. On the other hand, it is true that there were numerous works, published since the early 1990s, that dealt exclusively with the post-communist transition in countries such as Bulgaria, Romania and Albania. It is equally true that the same subject was treated in works dealing with countries of Eastern Europe in general.

At a general level, the scientific discourse did not easily rely on the sort of cultural stereotyping which was found in other areas of public discourse such as the media, political discourse and the works of essayists or artists among others. However, we find examples of cultural determinism even in the discussion of political and economic transition outside the context of former Yugoslavia. For instance, Jacques Rupnik, a French political scientist, described 2 models of transitioning from communism in Romania (1997: 1). On the one hand, Romania could use as

¹⁵ See for that matter the following publications: Denisa Kostovicova, Vesna Bojicic -Dželilovic (2006) "Europeanizing the Balkans: Rethinking the Post-communist and Post-conflict Transition", Ian Bache (2010), "Europeanization and multi-level governance, EU cohesion policy and pre-accession aid in SEE", Ramona Arfire (2011), "The moral regulation of the Second Europe, Transition, Europeanization and the Romanians, Dimitris Papadimitriou (2009), "Between enlargement-led Europeanization and Balkan exceptionalism", Alina Mungiu-Pippidi (2012), Perpetual transitions, Contentious property and Europeanization in SEE".

¹⁶ This is the case with the following works: "Reconstructing the Balkans, A geography of the new Southeast Europe (Darrick Danta, Derek Hall 1995), "Balkan reconstruction" (Veremis Thanos, Daniel Daianu 2001), "The new Balkans, Disintegration and reconstruction" (George Kouvertaris 2002), "Endgame in the Balkans, Regime change, European style" (Elizabeth Pond 2006).

a model the success of Central Europe and on the other hand, it could repeat the political, social and economic failures of the Balkans. Romania, in the sense of Jacques Rupnik, shared with its Balkan neighbors “the legacies of Ottoman Empire, of the communist rule, the economic backwardness and certain political and cultural traditions”. Such an affirmation mystifies both Romania and the Balkans. It describes an almost impossible position for Romania, that of being part of a region which has condemned her to perpetual backwardness. The powerful ideas behind this disposition reflect the logic of the *Huntingtonian* division of European cultures (Huntington 1996).

Over the course of the 2000s, the scientific discourse on the post-communist transition in the Balkans has become more aware of the dangers coming from the cultural stereotyping. Nevertheless, there are still certain dispositions towards generalizations that need to be taken into account. The voluminous literature on the post-communist transition has outlined a number of key issues that regard almost every country in the region. These are the *weak state*, the *weak rule of law*, the *fragility of reforms*, the *economic underperformance*, *corruption*, *nepotism*, the *atrophy of civil society* or *political instability*. What may raise questions is not, of course, the discussion of these very real phenomena but rather the extent to which they have been internalized by scientific research as negative categories. Ramona Arfire (2011), a Romanian scholar, refers to this process as the *moral regulation of the Second Europe*. In other words, there seems to be an external discourse – in this case everything relating to the EU – whose great normative power leads to the assumption of political, social and even cultural homogeneity in South-east Europe. Accordingly, a group of different societies is understood as a composition of undifferentiated mass. This reasoning, ultimately, regenerates not only the infamous *Balkan exceptionalism* but also the idea of an *everlasting Europeanization and transition* in South-East Europe. Ramona Arfire (2011) calls this the logic of *not yet*.

In many aspects, various understandings of the Greek economic crisis, which started from 2010 and still evolves, bears similar characteristics in terms of generalizations about the Balkans and Greece’s Balkan identity. It is well known that, for most of the Cold War period, due to its economic development, its position in NATO and membership in “the West”, Greece has been regarded as an exception in the Balkans, the non Balkan- Balkan state. On the occasion of the country’s admission in the Eurozone in 2001, the French newspaper *Le Monde* published a series of articles presenting Greece not only as an exception but as an example for the entire Balkan region¹⁷. Since the beginning of the economic crisis, such acclaim has been replaced by severe criticism of the Greek model, focusing on the political and economic inadequacies, on the expensive and counterproductive public sector, on the high levels of corruption and on gave their place to severe critiques of the political

¹⁷ See for that matter the following articles: Didier Kunz, “La Grèce, de l’entrée dans la Communauté à l’arrimage à la monnaie unique”, *Le Monde*, December 19, 2000 and “Athènes à l’assaut des Balkans”, *Le Monde*, December 19, 2000.

and economic inadequacies, of the expensive and counterproductive public sector, of the high levels of corruption and on the hostile environment for foreign investments. The “Balkan” Greece has been rediscovered in the light of this economic crisis.

In 2010, *Le Monde* published a series of articles raising the question of Greece’s relation to the Balkans¹⁸. In an interview published by the newspaper, Jacques Rupnik affirmed that Greece was, after all, a Balkan country with a history, an economy and a culture comparable to those of the other countries in the region. According to the French scholar, Greece’s only difference has been the fact that it never experienced communism. Similar remarks were made by Robert Kaplan, the author of “Balkan Ghosts”, in 2010. In an article published by the *New York Times*, the author concludes that Greece was paying the price of its geographic and cultural position¹⁹. Similar connotations could be found in academic discourse as well. For instance, the Bulgarian scholar Dimitar Bechev (2012) advanced the idea that Greece constitutes a warning about the perils of Europeanization without deeper transformation. On the basis of such powerful remarks, it becomes clear that Greece has been forced to re-look itself through the Balkan mirror. According to the main argument of this paper, the subordination of complex political and cultural phenomena to broader Balkan cultural explanations will ultimately regenerate the myth of the Balkans at the peril of more balanced understandings of both the region as a whole and each of its countries.

It is noteworthy that Greek journalists and politicians do not repel such critiques with a defense of the progress marked in the Balkans in the post-Cold War era or the deconstruction of Balkan stereotypes. On the contrary, many commentators and political figures have expressed a warning about the perils of a *new balkanization of Greece* due to the designs of the EU or the incapacity of the political elites to implement effective reforms and tackle difficult issues such as the productivity of the public sector, the fight against corruption, the increase of foreign investments or the viability of public debt. In other words, one could detect a reproduction of the Balkan stereotype in Greece itself and also the acknowledgement that Greece should do its best to avoid its downgrading in terms of being considered or becoming a Balkan country again.

The examples that prove such dispositions are numerous. In January 2014, Dimitris Tsiodras, a journalist, published an opinion on this matter in *Kathimerini*, one of the oldest and most respected newspapers of center-right orientation in Greece. The title of his article, “The danger of balkanization”, is thoroughly developed with a number of balkanist arguments: “Greece has managed to escape from its Balkan neighborhood. The right geostrategic choices, the openness due to the growth of commerce and shipping and the attention to education helped the country to trans-

¹⁸ See for that matter: “La Grèce est-elle un pays balkanique?”, *Le Monde*, June 2010.

¹⁹ See for that matter: Robert Kaplan, “For Greece’s economy, geography was destiny”, *The New York Times*, April 24, 2010.

form itself from a poor province of the Ottoman Empire into one of the thirty richest nations in the world. Greece is the first country of the region that entered the EU, the only that shares the Euro and today, even after 6 years of recess and a loss of 27% of its GDP, it presents a level of life much higher than the rest of the neighborhood. (...) If Greece's downfall continues, the country will not maintain a convergence with the rest of the EU but with the Balkans. In this case, the economic disaster will be immense and much worse than the one that we experience today. Greece will become the same with the rest of the neighborhood"²⁰.

This argumentation – quite common in Greece in the period between 2010 and 2015 – proves that Greece's participation in the EU is conceived as something rather incompatible with the country's Balkan dimension. According to this reasoning, if Greece wishes to remain European it must never return to the Balkans. The symbolic implications of such a proposition are of great significance. This is one of the strongest indicators of the extent to which the Balkan stereotype has been interiorized by Greeks through a process of auto-stigmatization, a phenomenon thoroughly studied by Maria Todorova (Todorova 1997).

Conclusions

This paper analyzed basic trends in the discussion of the post-conflict and post-communist transition in the Balkan region both in media and academic discourse in the post- Cold War period. An essential finding is that both significantly underestimated the fact that, due to historical specificities, the evolution of the region in this period has not been as homogenous and intertwined as popular perceptions present it to be. This is primarily the case in media discourse which in many cases chose a global narrative, combining the post-conflict and post-communist transitions, in order to explain the delays and the difficulties of Balkan countries as to their efforts to be integrated in the Euro- Atlantic structures.

In the context of academic discourse, such views have been much more moderate. It is very encouraging that the most recent wave of scholarly work on the region or on specific countries seems less concerned with general evaluations of the Balkans or interpretations of a particular country through the framework of an abstract Balkan culture and identity. Such an approach, evidently, demystifies the Balkans and adds pertinence and consistency. This choice should not lead a less systematic and analytical study of problematic phenomena. It should lead to an intensification of comparative studies in the context of the South-East European region.

In many aspects, the post-communist history of the Balkans by Robert Bideleux and Ian Jeffries (2006) resumes this project. A very important part of its introduction consists of warnings against the cultural determinism that has for long characterized numerous approaches on the Balkans. Quite understandably, Robert Bideleux and

²⁰ Dimitris Tsiodras, "The danger of balkanization", Kathimerini, January 21, 2014.

Ian Jeffries do not risk advancing an explicit definition of a specific Balkan culture or identity, probably because the study of their subject seems more protected when the particularities of each country are not predetermined through an abstract Balkan framework.

To this date, scholars with epistemological interests on the Balkans, notably Maria Todorova, have directed their efforts mostly at the deconstruction of popular perceptions about the Balkans and away from defining a singular Balkan culture and identity (Todorova 1997, 2004). This region, whose image and representations have obtained such importance (Mazower 2002), may be more safely approached with the awareness of the volatility that characterizes the ideas and perceptions ascribed upon it. As Katherine E. Fleming has argued (2000) the observation of the Balkans, mainly from a Western point of view, seems full of paradoxes and traps: the idea that the Balkans are at the same time very well-known but difficult to decipher, the tendency not to take into account the specificities of Balkan countries and peoples and consequently to lump them all together and the idea that the Balkans are somehow homogenous and unified on the basis of their heterogeneity. The best way to proceed with the understanding of this region would be to ground analysis on sound categorizations which leave little place for misunderstandings. This seems to be the case with the terms Western Balkans and South-East Europe both of which have been widely adopted in scientific discourse. Another categorization which places an emphasis on hard facts and not on popular myth is precisely the notion of post-communist Balkans.

In a broad sense, this article has put forward a genealogy of discourses that guided the popular perception and the academic study of South-East Europe in the post-Cold War period (Post-communism, post-conflict, reconstruction, Europeanization, Balkanism – deconstruction of stereotypes). These categorizations helped advance the knowledge of the region as a whole and still do so. On the other hand, the main argument of this paper is that all these notions will be most fruitful when applied with an acute awareness of the specificities of each Balkan country and the sensitivity against the recycling of an abstract Balkan depository of negative ideas.

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