

# Western Balkans as liminal space

Aleksandra Varga-Kocsicska

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## Abstract

The Western Balkans are clearly part of Europe geographically (central area of the Balkan Peninsula) but are not considered entirely European. In fact, it is seen as a frontier area within the borders of Europe, generally considered as a periphery in the international order. Given the European Union's ongoing central role in wider international economic and political relations, the bloc is often seen as lacking the necessary connections. However, old and new powers, regroupings, international crises, world pandemics and all major recent events clearly mark out the Western Balkans' interconnections and active participation in world politics. This paper focuses on the Western Balkans, with a particular attention to Serbia as case study. The global relevance of the region will be represented through the 'Balkan-type' power constellation.

**Keywords:** EU, Western Balkans, liminality, enlargement, identity

## Introduction

"Ideas and symbols can have different meanings depending on who is listening... Because listeners occupy different structural positions, they interpret a broker's ideas through divergent cultural lenses and histories. As a result, any symbol, word, or event can be read with contradictory, even mutually exclusive meanings." Stacie E. Goddard

Ever since the break-up of Yugoslavia, the Western Balkans have been the scene of various international interventions. In the 1990s, these included a wide range of diplomatic, military, economic and humanitarian initiatives, focusing on the stabilization of the conflicts in the area. The main aspect characterising many of these operations was the use of some form of enforcement and the de facto suspension of state sovereignty. Some of these interventions, while allowing room for the development of some forms of transnational movements, formally at the same time aimed at controlling the conflict and 'keeping the region out of the European mainstream' (Elbasani, 2008). From the Zagreb Summit Declaration of 2000 and the Thessaloniki Summit Declaration of 2003 the stabilisation project started to be complemented by the association process. For the first time, at the Thessaloniki Summit in Greece, the Western Balkans were presented with the 'European perspective': the promise of EU membership if they fulfil the required criteria (European Council, 2003). The Summits launched a 'transformation agenda' for the region, pledging that the independent republics would evolve into 'stable, self-sufficient democracies at peace with themselves and each other, with market

economies and the rule of law' (Independent Task Force, 2002: 28). Following nearly a decade of civil war, the Western Balkans, marginalised from the international community, are still broadly seen as isolated and peripheral - 'the frontier of Europe' (Duffield, 2001), and as in desperate need of adjustment and reform. In the popular media as well as in academic literature, the awareness of the region has been largely limited to the region's relationship with Europe, in particular the deficiencies in the Union's (EU) reform agenda. As in the case of other non-Western areas and locations, the duality between the Western Balkans and Europe, where Europe is the benchmark according to which the region is defined and assessed, underlies much of the writing on the Western Balkans (Chakrabarty, 2007). However, this hierarchical relationship has resulted in the conclusion that the Balkans is the most nationalistic and dominant, least cosmopolitan and "enlightened" area in Europe, and hence in need of the EU's civilising influence.

While the region's EU integration efforts are at the centre of academic and public policy debate, its ties with non-European areas and places are less well known. There has been less attention paid to the political, economic and social connections between the region and the diverse so-called 'emerging economies' such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), the MINT (Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria and Turkey) or the Gulf States. Some of these relations are rooted in long-standing historical bonds, such as those between Russia and Serbia or Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some are more recent, such as relations with China and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)- They represent new avenues of economic development for the Balkans, including diplomatic cooperation, investment in strategic industries, and logistical and infrastructure projects connecting the Western Balkans with Central Europe, the Middle East and North Africa (Poulain, 2011).

The study mainly analyses the subordinating and dissubjectivising aspects of the Europeanization paradigm in the Balkans, especially in the post-Yugoslav region, focusing on the situation in Serbia. The author presents the presumed necessity of neo-colonial control of the region, its recent and spatial framework, which postcolonial theory has not been able to answer. Instead of a (post)colonial, orientalist diversity, it is clearly an attempt to construct a European 'self-image' in this area. While suggesting the need to de-Balkanise the Balkans, the critique of Balkanism is, in fact, collaborating with those who promote a neo-colonial 'Europeanisation' path. Because it operates based on an exclusive and normative vision of Europe. This approach reinforces the illusion that the countries and nations of the Balkans, presumably, need to identify with those of Western Europe (the West) in order to be accepted as Europeans. Part of the study touches on what many see as the growing negative global impact and consequences of the critique of Orientalism. In the analysis, the perspective is reversed, implementing a process of decentralisation, in order to analyse the causes of the problem from a liminal point. That is, from a non-European or Western perspective. There are

or could be several consequences of the fact that the history of the Balkans has been different from European. Consequently, it did not participate in the development of the institutions and norms accepted in the West, which are now considered to be pan-European and imposed on the region. As a counterargument to this liminality, which is seen as disruptive, it is necessary to point out that some form of otherness in the Balkans, and in Serbia in particular, can be both wrong and extremely necessary. Thus, Serbia is a place in which "otherness" is both impermissible and potentially subjective.

Very few are pleased with Serbia as an "old" Balkan country. This dissatisfaction is regularly backed up by a temporal and a concept of space: "at the beginning of the 21st century" and "in Europe". While those outside Serbia who are affected see only those aspects of Serbia that suit their interests as being right, in Serbia as a whole, on both the political right and left, it is emphasized that nothing is as it should be. The right formal framework is being established in the republic, but somehow it is still seen as incomplete. The claim to at least make sense of these differences needs to be examined from two contrasting approaches. One theoretical approach is based on recognising the limitations of the Balkans, and with-it Serbia, but at the same time, continuing to focus on the negative external perception of the Balkans (and Serbia). The critique of Orientalism in the region, in the context of an undifferentiated Europe, recognises the example that places the European Balkans in a substantially different perspective from the non-European 'East'. While in the East, this recognition is in fact linked to resistance to the alienation of diversity, in the Balkans (which do not always fit into the category of the 'true' and 'correct' Europe), the path to subjectivisation requires a certain degree of estrangement of the unacceptable and essential differences within Europe. In other words, while in the East it is necessary to deny otherness, in the Balkans it is essential to highlight it. It is systematically said and seen as negative and subordinate because it cannot be the same. But it is still European, so the region is expected to seek similarity.

The second approach is the powerful perspective of Europeanisation, which is declared to be liberating. However, it can also be viewed as a modern form of neo-colonialism, which, unlike classical colonialism, is neither physical nor restricted in its geographical scope (Quijano – Ennis 2000). After all, it operates globally, including semi-peripheral spaces, and relies extensively on a Western-centric view of science that "seeks universal validity" (Castro-Gomez 2008). Therefore, the paradigm of Europeanisation is not only embodied in the process of Serbia's accession to the European Union, but an event also that seems increasingly distant. This study aims to show that the supposedly inclusive and empowering approaches, where the paradigm of Europeanization is seen by some as a possible future solution to the Balkan problems, has in fact had significant subjectivising effects on Serbia and other countries in the region. Both result from the liminality of space, the precariousness and elusiveness of its position. In its own way, this situation has contributed to the diversity of the Balkans, thereby

ignoring its character and consequences within Europe, turning it into an unknowable space. Thus, its defining, expressive and distinctive uniqueness has been erased. The first approach, to a large extent, denies the relevance of the region's cultural diversity, essentially transforming it into an undesirable difference. In this way, the fact of Europeanisation may in fact suggest, in a metaphorical sense, a kind of superiority of the West, which is to be assimilated and transformed. According to these concepts, the Balkan region, and therefore also Serbia, should be encouraged to seek to place its own specific but constitutive experience in the shadow of an equally specific Western history. Serbia acts as a "paradigmatic case" (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 230), as it reveals the general characteristics of these approaches and patterns and can serve as a useful case study for further exploration of economic relations in the area. It is coherent with the way in which some interpret the Western Balkans as a political effect of EU integration, building on the wider idea that the Balkans have been "invented" through interactions with the West (Todorova, 1999).

### **1. The Western Balkans**

The post-conflict, post-socialist development of the Western Balkans has been interpreted mainly in the framework of the region's relationship with the EU (Elbasani, 2008). Evaluated in the light of these processes, the region is seen as not fulfilling the criteria for European Union membership, so the political and economic studies are dominated by a "discourse of deficit or inadequacy" (Sidaway, 2003). Evaluations of the region's path have encouraged academics and experts in the field of policy to refer to the region as a 'super periphery' (Bartlett and Prica, 2013). These interpretations bear both temporal and geo-spatial connotations. Temporally, the region is seen as backward in comparison to the rest of Europe - meaning that it lacks several of the features of modern polities and societies. Geographically, it questions the region's identity within Europe. In either scenario, Europe is the main reference point for understanding the Balkans and its development. To explain the region's deficiencies, the science literature has concentrated on identifying the region's weaknesses, those that hinder its closer association with the EU. Moreover, the literature on political science has focused on the diagnosis of the region's weaknesses, those that hinder its closer association with the EU (Batt, 2004). Elbasani (2013) points to the historical heritage, the fragility of states and the weakness of pro-EU regulators as undermining conditions for EU integration.

The notion that Europe is to be understood as a "discursive construction, not a continent", a spatial construction without space, covering the existence of "many real, historical and imagined Europe's", is rarely accepted in postcolonial theory. Although Europe has always been more of a rolling and shifting space than we recognise on the map, there has been a constant tendency to narrow it down and identify it with the West, and to push aside all other features of Europe. However, the fear of Orientalist stereotypes, such as those that have

been created of the Balkans as 'other Europe', can be said to have too often hindered and hindered the Balkans and the countries within them from being accepted as 'Western'. The terms 'other' and 'otherness' in this context have a negative connotation. There is a strong inclination in Europe at the moment to treat any stress on differences from the West as, in fact, inferiority, essentially a variation on the fashionable notion, in a roundabout way, that we all have to be the same to be equal.

Unfortunately, the critique of Orientalism and Balkanism works in synergy with the Europeanisation paradigm, and virtually marginalises the Balkans from Europe. Declaratively welcoming, it discursively erases space in the name of defending against stereotypes - and therefore conveys to us an image of 'nothing', that is, something that is both unknowable and deprived of everything that is valuable and valid. Therefore, if Serbia cannot be something different, then it cannot be European, that is, it can only be a 'flawed' Europe, a bad copy of the past of others. Part of the flawed principle, the real fate of local liminality - a fracture rather than an imaginary bridge between two worlds - is to be defined solely through negative determinants.

Moreover, in recent years, there have been other critical interventions in which both Baker (2018) and Bjelic (2017) have attempted to connect postcoloniality in the Balkans to global structures of colonialism and radicalization. Chari and Verdery (2009:12) offer a call for research on postcolonialism, more specifically to 'think critically about colonial relations alongside market and democratic transitions'. It calls on researchers to combine a post-socialist reading of South-eastern Europe with post- and decolonialist theory 'to identify the region's imperial and quasi-colonial legacies, contemporary forms of domination, hierarchy and resistance, and practices of complicity and cooperation, but also of struggle, protest and resistance' (Kusic, Lottholtz and Manolova, 2019: 8). Opening new methodological pathways for research and critique, both these perspectives extend initial concerns by deconstructing the epistemic boundaries that have positioned the region as backward in relation to Europe. Governance studies (Dean, 2010) are the main conceptual sources for rethinking the encounters between the Western Balkans and emerging economies. The governance approach focuses on those actions that seek to shape behaviour according to a particular set of norms and goals (Dean, 2010: 18). Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, government studies examine the organizational practices, techniques and knowledge through which governance takes place, paying attention to the ethical content of governance in terms of what is governed, the work of government in terms of how it is governed, and the basis of ethical practices - the end aim that government seeks to accomplish (Dean, 2010). Scholars within the framework of governmental rationality believe that the exercise of political power is characterized by particular rationalities of governance, and they seek to extend these rationalities.

## 2. Balkans and Identity

As the current borders in the Balkans do not necessarily reflect the ethnic divisions, debates have emerged about ethno-national borders and ethnic minorities. The break-up also opened the way for the establishment of ad hoc tribunals and alternative legal mechanisms at international level. For example, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, the first of its kind, has only recently completed its work. The Tribunal has significantly informed international law, setting precedents for future cases. The ad hoc nature of the Tribunal and its international approach were intended to deter people from violating international law, to facilitate the delivery of justice and to set a precedent that the international community would not stand idly by, and watch atrocities being committed.

Another legal problem is the creation or legalisation of new state borders and declarations of independence. The term 'Balkanisation' has become popular in debates on disintegration and has forced us to question the security of existing borders in many contexts of regional/national fragmentation. With growing unease among ethnic minorities across Europe and elsewhere, the notion of 'Balkanisation' persists and may also refer to future fragmentations. This concept has prompted a rethinking of international notions of sovereignty, with reference to ethnic, linguistic and related sovereignty claims. Most recently, the debate over the status of Kosovo continues unresolved, bringing to the fore issues of international law, sovereignty, minority rights and borders that set a precedent for the international community. Since the break-up of Yugoslavia and the accession of Slovenia and Croatia to the European Union, the possible integration of the other former Yugoslav countries has been a hot topic throughout the Balkans. Slovenia was admitted to the European Union in 2004 and Croatia in 2013, while Serbia, Montenegro and Northern Macedonia remain candidate countries and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo potential candidates. The fact that not all the former Yugoslav countries have joined the EU has sparked resentment in the countries that are candidates. However, Montenegro, Serbia and northern Macedonia have made some progress in meeting the criteria for membership. It will be interesting to see how the nature of EU enlargement develops in the coming years. With Brexit, the prospect of new EU member states and growing nationalisms, the European Union is at a significant point in its development. All of this has also been heavily influenced by the emergence of Covid-19, which has already caused visible, lasting damage not only in the Balkans but also across Europe. It has caused and is causing problems that will take years to overcome. It will take Serbia and the other Balkan countries, already in difficulty, even further away from the goals they have set themselves. Whatever this means in the current situation, it means either a rapprochement with Europe (mainly the EU) or, conversely, a strong drift away and the choice of another path.

The break-up of Yugoslavia taught us to question international, European and Balkan laws and norms. Through a rethinking of belonging, the break-up forced the former Yugoslavs

to reposition themselves in the post-Yugoslav, European and global spaces. As well as influencing perceptions of identity in the Balkans and among former Yugoslav immigrants, it has also led to a number of guidelines for international law. The break-up and the responses to it have set precedents for ad hoc tribunals and influence current discourses on national independence. The break-up also created two new EU Member States and additional candidate countries. The Balkans have often been portrayed as Europe's 'internal other', on which Western Europe has often 'projected its concerns'. As a consequence, the possible admission of the remaining former Yugoslav countries into the European Union could bridge the European-Balkan divide and lead to a rethinking of the meaning of European identity and thinking. Twenty years on, the break-up of Yugoslavia continues to have an impact on the Balkans, Europe and the international community through issues of identity, migration, nationalism and international law.

For quite some time, we have seen the development of closer political relations between Serbia and the EU. But after a while, this process of closer relations has raised questions about Serbian national identity. As a result, the symbolic struggle over national belonging flared up again. These struggles increasingly became expressive in reference to opposing civilisational identities. The question of whether Serbia belongs to the East or to the West was thus raised. It should be mentioned here that, although this East-West dichotomy has been persistent in the region, the association and meaning of the geographical definitions of "East" and "West" have changed too. Green (2005: 143) notes that 'East' whit times met the definition of Ottoman Empire. 'Byzantine', mean the influence of Russia and the Orthodox Church, and at other times 'Communist, as the former Soviet Union. 'West' was identified with Western imperialism, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, modernity and enlightenment, economic prosperity and everyday technological progress. The concept of liberal democracy should be also be mentioned here, as the 'East' and the 'West' are thus not only geographical concepts, but also concepts of civilisation, culture and history.

These geographical lines, mentioned several times, are the basis of the region's history. As the Western Balkans were located on the geographical margins of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires, South-Eastern Europe became 'the main battleground of the reluctant mutual courtship and perpetual rivalry between the two worlds' (Hozic, 2004: 36). 5 centuries of Ottoman rule, the influence of pan-Slavism, and the traditional spiritual connection with the Byzantine Empire through Christian Orthodoxy. The emergence of state socialism after the Second World War, all of which were sources of Serbia's 'orientalism', is simultaneously present in the region's collection of 'Western' world order characteristics. It is geographically located within Europe, with Austro-Hungarian rule in the north of the country, and the fact that in the mid-nineteenth century, a large part of the Serbian political elite was raised in the Habsburg Empire (Zivkovic, 2011:44). These different and unique, cultural and political

contexts and their legacies meant that Serbia could neither fully settle nor fully exclude itself from either 'world'. The point in Serbia's history when it established contact with both the East and the West. One such example is the symbolic move by the Serbian parliament in 2008 to ratify on the same day the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU and the sale of the Serbian state oil and gas company to Russia's Gazprom.

In the process of redefining identities that has permeated the post-Yugoslav region, animosity has also emerged due to the ethno-political charge created by the break-up of Yugoslavia. Within the Balkans, the political polarisation of ethnicities and nationalisms has made the conflict more permanent, as new borders have created new citizenships, separating people who once existed as 'Yugoslavs'. The new citizenships required people to reconcile their identities, as they were no longer Yugoslavs but citizens of the (now) former Yugoslav countries. In Serbia, in most cases, people became eligible for citizenship of several former Yugoslav countries at the same time. However, others remained stateless and became official refugees in the countries with which they ethnically identified. This complicated (and still further complexed) the relationship between ethnicity and citizenship. Hence, in the period immediately after the break-up of Yugoslavia, the sense of belonging was called into question. In addition to influencing the sense of belonging, the persistence of tensions between former Yugoslavs, especially ethnic-national tensions, leads us to reflect on ways of alleviating the tensions and on the nature of identity formation itself. As it takes time for tensions to be defused or eased, and as ethno-national and political problems persist in the region, the future of socio-political relations between the former Yugoslavs remains uncertain - as exemplified by the current situation in Montenegro, where religious and identity tensions between Serbs and Montenegrins are at an advanced stage. In addition to affecting the antagonisms between the former Yugoslavs, the break-up has thus significantly altered Balkan identities and nationalities, with lasting implications for any concept of the future, including EU membership and ideological allegiance.

After the fall of the Milosevic regime, the main source of polarisation among the Serbian political elite became the relationship between Serbia and the EU. The Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) and the energy cooperation agreement with the Russian state, concluded at the same time, were controversial because they signalled the direction the country was taking. As the SAA set out the contractual obligations and outlined the conditions for Serbia's EU membership, the ratification of the SAA signalled Serbia's official intention to pursue EU membership. The energy cooperation between Serbia and Russia set the conditions for the sale of Serbia's state-owned oil and gas company to Russia's Gazprom, making Serbia dependent on Russia for its energy supply. It is widely believed that Serbia sold the state-owned company below market value in exchange for Russian diplomatic support in preventing international recognition of Kosovo's declaration of independence. The latter



agreement was seen as a move by Serbia closer to Russia and was therefore opposed by pro-EU parties. The SAA was seen by anti-EU and nationalist-conservative parties as an indirect recognition of Kosovo's independence and was therefore opposed. Although both agreements were ratified on the same day, the ratification of the SAA was faced with an unprecedented situation of abstention by the Prime Minister.

Is there a definition of the term the "global Balkans"? As the term of Western Balkans is most often associated with "Balkanisation", which actually means the disintegration of an entity into smaller and smaller pieces. As a result, the Western Balkans is thought to be a fragmented, incomplete jigsaw puzzle. The idea of the 'global Balkans' - the juxtaposition of the words 'global' and 'Balkan' - has deliberately problematised these associations. The intention behind the use of the term was twofold. Firstly, rather than thinking of the two as opposites, I sought to show empirically The Western Balkans is both a constitutive site of global encounters and of global politics. Indeed, they are a constitutive part of various global aspirations, in European Union, to transform Europe's external borders into 'stable, self-sufficient democracies at peace with themselves and each other, with market economies and the rule of law' (Independent Task Force, 2002: 28).

## **Conclusion**

The heart of the European Union's values are the democratic ideals, human rights and the rule of law. In the case of the candidate countries, the negotiations have encountered many obstacles in the democratisation process, and it may take decades before the necessary environment is fully established. A deficit of democratic traditions, the (semi)fragile institutions, ethnic pressures and a slow post-war economic recovery have hampered the democratisation route. This situation is not at all surprising, as the Western Balkans and the states in them must make enormous efforts to maintain "normality". It took decades, even centuries, for Western democracies to establish the democracies we know today.

The European Union has been promoting EU membership and EU conditionality to encourage democracy in the Western Balkans, with varying degrees of success. Drawing on the experience of the major enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe, the EU has noticeably tightened the accession rules for the Western Balkan countries. Noticeably, they are more cautious about imposing conditions and have not been able to deliver any meaningful promises for a long time. The governments of the Western Balkan countries appear to be making efforts to accept and comply with most of the EU rules, but the actual implementation of most of the reforms has been extremely slow. For several reasons. If we look only at the last 2 years, the pandemic COVID-19 and the migration crisis in the South (since 2015), which has been very strong. The political elite is perceived to be less committed to the EU accession process than the Central and Eastern European countries were in the past. They are trying to preserve their

domestic political power based on nationalist discourses, while rhetorically trying to comply with EU rules in order to stay on the EU track, which has certain advantages. This makes the whole process take much longer, and the domestic political elite can afford to do so because the electorate is also more sceptical about the EU. Therefore, the EU integration process in the Western Balkans is largely under attack from national political elites and national identity.

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**Contact address**

Aleksandra Varga-Kocsicska: PhD student

ID ORCID: 0000-0003-1140-6180

National University of Public Service

Doctoral School of Public Administration

Email: Varga-Kocsicska.Aleksandra2@uni-nke.hu