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Balkanism and balkanization in the European political and cultural discourses, from the Yugoslav wars to the present days

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Balkanisme et balkanisation dans les discours politiques et culturels européens, depuis les guerres yougoslaves jusqu'à nos jours

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Abstract: *The term "Balkans" is often associated with negative connotations, symbolizing conflict, instability and underdevelopment. This article critically analyzes the concepts of* balkanism *and* balkanization*, exploring their evolution from the Yugoslav wars to the present. Balkanism has historically depicted the region as fragmented and conflict-ridden, with these perceptions intensifying after the 1990s. Such narratives have not only shaped European political discourse, but also contributed to a global understanding of the Balkans as a symbol of instability. The article examines the impact of these perceptions on the cultural, social and political identities of the region, as well as their ongoing influence on contemporary issues. Moreover, it explores how the concept of balkanization has been applied to our region, further reinforcing notions of fragmentation. This article also addresses the unique position of the Western Balkans, highlighting its distinction from other Balkan countries that have joined the European Union and underscores a sense of "otherness".*

Keywords: *Western Balkans, Balkanism, Balkanization, Yugoslav wars, European Union.*

Résumé : *Le terme « Balkans » est souvent associé à des stéréotypes négatifs, symbolisant le conflit, l'instabilité et le sous-développement. Cet article analyse de manière critique les concepts de* balkanisme *et de* balkanisation*, en explorant*

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leur évolution depuis les guerres yougoslaves jusqu'à nos jours. Le balkanisme a historiquement décrit la région comme fragmentée et marquée par les conflits, ces perceptions s'amplifiant depuis les années 90. De tels récits ont non seulement façonné le discours politique européen, mais ont également contribué à une compréhension globale des Balkans comme un symbole d'instabilité. L'article examine l'impact de ces perceptions sur les identités culturelles, sociales et politiques de la région, ainsi que leur influence continue sur les enjeux contemporains. De plus, il explore comment le concept de balkanisation a été appliqué à notre région, renforçant ainsi des notions liées à la fragmentation. Cet article aborde également la position unique des Balkans occidentaux, mettant en évidence leur distinction par rapport aux autres pays des Balkans qui ont rejoint l'Union européenne, et souligne le sentiment d'« altérité ».

Mots-clés : *Balkans occidentaux, balkanisme, balkanisation, guerres yougoslaves, Union Européenne.*

Introduction

Regarding terminology, the term *Balkans* has long carried symbolic weight far beyond its geographic meaning. In European cultural and political discourse, it often serves as a metaphor for fragmentation, stagnation, perpetual struggle, conflict and backwardness. It is a space simultaneously within and outside Europe. It played a central role in the rise and fall of empires, the formation of states and the shaping of modern nations (Abdula & Erken, 2025, p. 1), serving as a boundary between East and West (religion), and a border between the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires (Wiberg, 1994, p. 8).

A symbol of instability. Therefore, the Balkans are viewed as a "comic opera written in blood" or a "powder keg" (Durham, 2008). Even today, the notion of "otherness" remains relevant, as vividly illustrated by Maria Todorova (1998) in *Imagining the Balkans*, where she seeks to explain the distinction between "them" – the civilized Europeans, and "us" – the primitive Balkan people. And, according to some sources, people in the Balkans still argue and kill each other over things that happened half a century ago (Cohen, 1995, p. 24). This ambivalent representation, as Todorova (1998) famously demonstrated, does not arise from objective realities, but from a discursive practice she termed *balkanism*: the projection of Europe's anxieties, contradictions and

hierarchies onto its southeastern frontier. The Balkans were not a unified or cohesive region. On the contrary, it was marked by deep divisions (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 379). Although geographically part of Europe, the Balkans often gravitate emotionally and culturally toward the East, creating a deep sense of identity crisis. Indeed, it is often portrayed as the "problematic periphery" of Europe, geographically close enough, yet symbolically very distant and different. In this narrative, the Balkans are often imagined as a space of cultural and political otherness, described as "rotten tissue of Europe" (Đorić, 2024, p. 74), or as a kind of metaphorical "scarecrow" embodying what modern Europe seeks to move beyond (Todorova, 1998). This representation reinforces a long-standing description in which the region is viewed as wild, unstable and unable to meet the so-called standards of "civilized" Europe (Ademović, 2019, p. 33).

This tension is reflected in Western discourse, which swings between two impulses: to hold the region at a distance or to shape and integrate it through political and legal mechanisms (Kmezić, 2020). Meanwhile, Balkan societies have shown a strong desire to "become European" to align not only politically, but also culturally and psychologically with the West. However, this aspiration often encounters significant obstacles: structural (weak institutions and governance challenges) and symbolic (deep-rooted stereotypes and narratives of "otherness") (Todorova, 1998; Bakić-Hayden, 1995). Moreover, efforts at *Europeanization* are frequently frustrated by the uneven effectiveness of EU conditionality, particularly in countries where domestic elites resist reform and democratic consolidation remains fragile (Džankić et al., 2019). As a result, the Balkans remain caught in a liminal space: neither fully inside nor entirely outside the European project. For this very reason, it became necessary to redefine and "civilize" those Eastern European countries into broader political and socio-economic structures, by emphasizing their national identity and reinterpreting their history (especially under communism) (Milošević, 2023, p. 600), through mechanisms such as European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership.

Nevertheless, it is important to underline that, from the 19th century onward, the Balkans have been imagined as a liminal zone, between "a tragedy and a myth", East and West, Christianity and Islam and civilization and barbarism. Yet, as scholars such as Bjelić and Savić (2002), and Mishkova (2018) remind us, the *Balkans* are not a natural or self-evident entity, but a fluid politically changed construction. The region includes not only the territories of the former Yugoslavia, but also Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania and parts of Turkey, each with distinct histories and cultural trajectories. Hence, reducing the Balkans to the ex-Yugoslav space reproduces precisely the kind of epistemic narrowing the *Balkans* discourse has historically produced.

Besides that, by the late 1990s, European institutions introduced the term *Western Balkans* as a political construction, often viewed negatively – perceived as a vague formula grouping the region's most "unstable" countries: the former Yugoslavia (minus Slovenia), plus Albania (Đukanović, 2020, p. 26-27). Thus, in domestic academic circles, this phrase is often criticized as artificial and externally imposed, designed to facilitate integration of these countries into Euro-Atlantic structures (Stepić, 2012). Within this framing, major Western powers positioned themselves as "guardians" of European stability, claiming a "civilizational duty" to enforce order in the Balkans: if needed, by force, in order to prevent and repeat of history, as it was the outbreak of World War I (Simić, 2013, p. 114). However, despite the involvement of international actors and the organization of various negotiation efforts and diplomatic meetings, the breakup of Yugoslavia and the outbreak of civil war could not be prevented.

Therefore, this article approaches the Balkans as a conceptual and symbolic field, rather than a fixed geography. Its purpose is not to reaffirm the familiar *clichés*, but to examine how such stereotypes function within European narratives of self-definition. The Balkans, in that sense, become the "constructive other" of the Europe, a mirror against which modern Europe defines its rationality, civility and progress (Todorova, 1998; Bakić-Hayden, 1995).

However, the persistence of those narratives is not merely a product of Western imagination. Intellectuals and local/domestic elites have often internalized and reproduced them, oscillating between self-exoticization and defensive *Europeanization*. This dual dynamic (external projection and internal appropriation) has shaped the political, cultural and symbolic landscape of the region from the 19th century to the present.

Instead of seeing *balkanization* merely as a metaphor for fragmentation, the article places it within Europe's broader history of nation-state building. The collapse of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires and later Yugoslavia into ethnic nation-states reflects not Europe's failure, but its continuation on the continent's southeastern edge. Thus, the violence of *balkanization* echoes the inherent violence of Europe's own modernity.

This article proceeds by tracing how these discourses evolved during and after the Yugoslav wars, how neoliberal reforms and ethnonationalist politics reshaped the region and how identity and memory, through phenomena such as *Yugonostalgia*, continue to engage with the legacies of *balkanism* and *Europeanization*. In doing so, it seeks to move beyond essentialist readings and to understand the Balkans not as a static periphery, but as a dynamic site where Europe's own contradictions are played out. Thus, this article adopts *balkanism* as its central analytical framework, rather than treating it as a background concept. It examines how balkanist discourse operates across three empirically distinct, but discursively connected cases: the Kosovo conflict, Montenegro's path to independence and the phenomenon of Yugonostalgia. In accordance with mentioned, this article asks three interrelated questions: How does balkanist discourse function in each of these cases? How has it transformed from the 1990s to the present? Where are the limits of balkanist discourse in explaining contemporary political and cultural dynamics in the region? These themes will be explored in greater detail in the sections that follow.

Neoliberalism and Ethnonationalism in the Breakup of Yugoslavia

More than three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Southeast Europe remains politically fragmented and unstable, with divergent post-socialist trajectories (Anastasakis, 2013, p. 91). The dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s reinforced the notion of "re-*balkanisation*" and revived long-standing Western stereotypes encapsulated in the concept of *balkanization* – understood as violent fragmentation along ethnic or national lines and the production of weak, conflict-prone states (Todorova, 1998; Hammond, 2016). Although historically rooted in the Balkans, the term has long been globalized and used to describe instability well beyond the region (Đorić, 2024, p. 77-78).

However, explanatory frameworks that focus predominantly on memory politics, historical animosities or cultural particularism obscure the material and political-economic foundations of Yugoslavia's collapse. Competing interpretations of the breakup – whether Yugoslavia was externally dismantled, gradually hollowed out or simply ceased to function –, often overlook the decisive role of post-socialist transformation under neoliberal conditions (Šorović 2024a, p. 81).

Authors such as Martin Malia claim that communism in Europe collapsed primarily due to its own unsustainability. Malia (1994, p. 1-17, 505-520) emphasizes that the socialist revolution was a major historical venture that revealed both in the idealistic and repressive sides of the system. Nevertheless, it profoundly influenced societies and left a lasting sense of fascination.

Following Tito's death in 1980, Yugoslavia entered a deep structural crisis marked by economic decline, debt dependency and IMF-led austerity measures. The introduction of market-oriented reforms undermined the system of socialist self-management, intensified regional inequalities and eroded the material basis of federal solidarity. At the same time, republican elites instrumentalized ethnonationalism as a strategy to maintain political power amid social dislocation and declining legitimacy.

Rather than opposing forces, neoliberal restructuring and ethnonationalism functioned synergistically: economic fragmentation enabled nationalist mobilization, while nationalism legitimized the dismantling of federal institutions and social rights.

The League of Communists of Yugoslavia, once the integrative core of the system, fragmented between 1989 and 1991 along republican lines, reflecting both ideological disintegration and competing elite interests (Šorović, 2024a, p. 80). As federal authority collapsed, nationalism replaced socialism as the dominant mode of political legitimation, paving the way for violent conflict.

The wars that followed, from Slovenia to Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H), were not the result of ancient hatreds, but of state collapse under conditions of economic liberalization, elite competition and international intervention. External actors played a crucial role, not only through diplomatic recognition and selective support, but also by embedding the region into a global neoliberal order. Expectations of backing from Germany, the EU, Russia or the United States further reduced incentives for compromise and prolonged the conflicts (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Maull & Stahl 2002; Brenner, 1992).

The *Dayton Peace Agreement* ended the Bosnian war in 1995, but institutionalized ethnic division and produced a highly dysfunctional post-war state. Across the former Yugoslavia, war and transition together resulted in deindustrialization, mass displacement and permanent restructuring of social relations. Thus, the destruction of Yugoslavia should be understood not as a failure of memory or history, but as the outcome of a specific historical convergence of neoliberal transformation and ethnonationalist politics, embedded in broader global power relations.

The Kosovo Conflict and NATO intervention (1998-1999)

The crisis in the region of Kosovo and Metohija (K&M), particularly the ethnic tensions and conflicts between Serbs and Albanians has deep historical roots extending over many decades.

Depending on the analytical perspective adopted, scholars offer divergent interpretations of the origins of this profoundly divided society, whose polarization has, over time, manifested itself in open confrontation, violence and war (Šorović, 2024b, p. 151; Šorović, 2025, p. 448). It is precisely this multiplicity of interpretations that makes the Kosovo question a useful case for examining how the Balkans are frequently portrayed in international discourse as a space of "permanent conflict", a defining feature of the Balkans narrative.

What unites most serious scholarly approaches is the recognition that the Kosovo issue cannot be understood in isolation or reduced to a single causal explanation. Rather, it is the outcome of a complex interplay of historical processes, socio-political development and collective memories, often shaped by trauma, displacement and competing narratives. In this context, reductive explanations that overlook such complexity tend to reinforce stereotypical representations of the Balkans as inherently unstable and irrational.

At the same time, it is important to note that Kosovo long remained the most economically underdeveloped region of the former Yugoslavia. A limited industrial base, exceptionally high population growth and the absence of significant natural resources – aside from extensive reserves of low-quality coal – severely constrained prospects for sustained economic development. On the eve of the escalation of conflict, the population was predominantly Albanian (around 83%), while Serbs and Montenegrins accounted for around 15%. During that period, rising nationalist sentiment among segments of the Albanian population contributed to rising tensions, alongside claims that Serb and Montenegrin communities were subjected to various forms of pressure to leave the region, further deepening ethnic polarization (Crnobrnja, 1996, p. 93).

In Serbian historical and cultural consciousness, Kosovo occupies a powerful symbolic position as the heartland of the medieval Serbian state and a central site of Orthodox Christian heritage. At the same time, Kosovo holds an important place in the

formation of Albanian national identity, particularly through the establishment of the League of Prizren in 1878, commonly interpreted as the beginning of the Albanian national awakening. During the nineteenth century, as the Ottoman Empire gradually retreated from the Balkans, Serbian and Albanian national aspirations increasingly came into conflict (Hudson, 2003, p. 64; Vladisavljević, 2020, p. 114). Poulton (1991, p. 57) argues that the Albanian national movement was, to a considerable extent, a reaction to the territorial claims of neighboring Balkan states, while the creation of Albania in 1912/1913 was significantly shaped by the interests and interventions of the Great Powers. However, it was not only in the interest of Austro-Hungary, but also of Italy, as both sought to limit the ambitions of neighboring states (Greece, Serbia and Montenegro), preventing them from becoming too large and threatening to their strategic interests.

Following the First World War and especially after the Second World War, Yugoslav authorities pursued policies aimed at integrating Kosovo more firmly into the broader state framework. Combined with the political and cultural dominance of the Serbian and Montenegrin population, these policies contributed to a sense of marginalization among Albanians. At the same time, the institutional position of Albanians gradually improved, including the recognition of the Albanian language as one of the official languages. Nevertheless, some interpretations viewed the expansion of Kosovo's autonomy as a potential step toward the project of a "Great Albania" (Hudson, 2003, p. 64-65).

In the years that followed, significant emigration of the Serbian population from Kosovo was recorded, accompanied by claims of intimidation and attacks. As Crnobrnja (1996, p. 93) notes, "Albanian nationalists were applying overt and covert pressure on the Serbs and Montenegrins to move out of Kosovo, with the purpose of making it ever more ethnically homogeneous". By the mid-1990s, the Kosovo issue ranked high among potential crisis hotspot in international political circles, although it was often neglected or addressed in an *ad hoc* manner (Simić, 2000, p. 20).

The 1981 demonstrations demanding republican status for

Kosovo, followed by the revocation of its broad autonomy in 1989, further exacerbated relations between Belgrade and the Albanian population (Di Gracija, 2017, p. 61). Within international frameworks, the Kosovo issue increasingly became a tool of political pressure on Serbia, a process that culminated toward the end of the 1990s.

However, the role of the international community (including the United States, NATO and various international organizations) was complex and remains the subject of extensive scholarly debate. NATO's intervention (1999) marked a critical turning point, justified in terms of human rights protection and the prevention of a "humanitarian catastrophe", while simultaneously raising serious questions concerning international law, the selective application of norms and long-term consequences of such actions. Numerous studies emphasize that events such as the Račak massacre played a decisive role in shaping international perceptions of the conflict, becoming embedded within a broader discourse that once again constructed the Balkans as a space of violence requiring external intervention. In that sense, the Kosovo question can be understood as an illustrative example of the operation of Balkans discourse: complex local conflicts are reduced to morally simplified narratives in which the region is portrayed as inherently unstable and incapable of self-regulation. Such representations often obscure internal social dynamics and historical contexts, while simultaneously legitimizing external political and military intervention (Todorova, 2000, p. 119-123). This discursive framing allows the Kosovo case to be read not only as a concrete political and military conflict, but also as a paradigmatic example of how balkanist discourse operates in practice.

The Kosovo case illustrates a classical form of balkanist discourse, in which historical complexity is reduced to moral binaries and the region is framed as inherently violent, irrational and incapable of self-regulation. Within this narrative, the Balkans appear as a space of "permanent crisis", requiring external supervision, humanitarian intervention and long-time international governance. Such representations do not merely describe the conflict; they actively produce a particular understanding of it, one

that legitimizes external political and military involvement while marginalizing local agency and alternative interpretations. In this sense, Kosovo functions as an archetypal case through which balkanism becomes operationalized in international political discourse.

Following the events in Račak, which were interpreted in the international public sphere as a massacre and constituted a turning point in legitimizing international intervention, the unsuccessful negotiations in Rambouillet ensued.[1] Although these talks were formally presented as an effort to achieve a peaceful resolution of the conflict, numerous scholars argue that they functioned more as an ultimatum than as a genuinely balanced diplomatic process (Spirou, 2021; Hudson, 2003; Kovačević, 2004; Šorović 2025). NATO's bombing campaign (1999) against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which lasted 78 days, had far-reaching political and demographic consequences, including the large-scale displacement of the Serbian population from Kosovo and the establishment of a long-term international military presence.

Within a broader theoretical framework, the manner in which the Kosovo question has been represented in international discourse can be understood as illustrative of the Balkans paradigm. Complex historical and political processes are frequently reduced to morally simplified narratives of "ancient ethnic hatreds" and the inherent instability of the Balkans, thereby legitimizing external intervention while marginalizing local perspectives. Such discursive reductionism directly reflects to core assumptions of the critique of balkanism articulated by Todorova (2009, p. 119-123), in which the Balkans are constructed as a space requiring continuous external supervision and management.

[1] According to Priština, the incident was a "massacre"; however Belgrade officials view it as an "anti-terrorist action" (MoD 2019).

Micro-case: Montenegro's Path to Independence (2006)

Throughout most of the 20th century, Montenegro was part of various Yugoslav state formations, undergoing a series of political and constitutional transformations. Although this chapter takes Montenegro as its primary case, it does not treat Montenegrin developments as exceptional to the Balkans. Rather, Montenegro is used as a *micro-case* through which wider balkanist patterns can be observed: the uneven symbolic mapping of "Europeanness", the reproduction of centre–periphery hierarchies, and the tendency to read political change in the region through a civilizational vocabulary. Similar mechanisms operate, though with different historical registers and geopolitical positioning, in and about Slovenia (often narrated as "Central European"), Greece (frequently framed through "European origins" versus "Balkan disorder"), Bulgaria (as a borderline "Eastern European" case), Albania and Kosovo (as "late" or "unfinished" Europeanisation), and Turkey (as the paradigmatic liminal "in-between"). In other words, Montenegro is not presented as the Balkans, but as one analytically useful site within a broader discursive field (Bakić-Hayden, 1995, p. 917-922). In this article, Montenegro is analyzed alongside Serbia and Kosovo as three interconnected post-Yugoslav cases through which the functions, shifts and limits of balkanist discourse can be traced from the 1990s to the present.

After the First World War, it was integrated into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, later renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Following the Second World War, it became one of the six constituent republics of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), with formally equal status and greater autonomy, particularly after the adoption of the Constitution in 1974 (Krnetić, 2019, p. 145-148).

Following the dissolution of the SFRY, Montenegro remained in a union with Serbia[2] – first as part of the FRY (1992), and later within the more loosely structured State Union of Serbia and Montenegro (2003), which provided for the possibility of a referendum after three years. This period served as a prelude to Montenegro's decisive step toward independence in 2006.

Despite significant political differences and animosity between opposing blocs, the referendum campaign unfolded surprisingly peacefully, with far fewer tensions than in previous elections. Greater intensity was noticeable only in the final days of the campaign. Instead of intense media competition, both camps shifted their focus to grassroots efforts, relying on a "door-to-door campaign" strategy aimed at reaching as many voters as possible in a country with a small electorate. Party structures were fully mobilized, and the final result demonstrated the effectiveness of both sides, although the outcome could ultimately have only one winner (Darmanović, 2006, p. 12-15).

On the night of the referendum, the Montenegrin roulette stopped at 55.5% – exactly the threshold required by the EU. More than 3.000 observers from the Organization for Security an Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe, as well as numerous domestic and international non-governmental organizations, assessed that the vote took place in a fair and democratic atmosphere, without major irregularities. The high turnout of 86.5% further confirmed the legitimacy of the process.

[2] The political divergence between the two states became particularly evident in 1997, as relations between Milo Đukanović and Slobodan Milošević deteriorated, reflecting broader disagreements about the future of the joint country. A key turning point was Đukanović's statement to the *Monitor* newspaper, in which he declared that Milošević was a politically outdated figure. Shortly thereafter, a significant split occurred within the previously unified Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS). This internal rupture marked the beginning of a gradual political reorientation in Montenegro, with an increasing focus on strengthening ties with the West. Within the ruling Montenegrin elite – one part of it, a growing faction began to advocate for greater autonomy, ultimately aiming at the separation of the Republic from the federal union (See more in Šorović, 2024b).

With 55.5% of the votes for independence, the EU-imposed threshold[3] was narrowly exceeded, enabling international recognition of the referendum outcome. Despite objections from the unionist bloc, reports from both international and domestic observers confirmed the regularity of the process, thus marking Montenegro's formal entry into a new phase of its political history – as an independent country (Friis, 2007, p. 84).

The referendum process in Montenegro unfolded not only within a local and regional framework, but also within a broader symbolic space in which the Balkans have traditionally been assigned the role of a politically unstable and deeply divided region. In this context, Montenegrin independence was interpreted not merely as a result of political discord with Belgrade, but also as an attempt to distance itself from the "Balkan" past and reposition within a "European" narrative. As Maria Todorova points out, "Balkanism" functions as a discursive matrix that attributes archaic traits to the Balkans – instability and violence – in contrast to a rational and orderly "West". By seeking international recognition through EU mediation and referendum legitimization, Montenegro implicitly conveyed its readiness for "Europeanisation", which further shaped the reception of its statehood turn in European political discourse (Todorova, 2009, p. 186-188; Goldsworthy, 1998, p. 59). Discursively, this "Europeanised" framing differed from Kosovo, which was often narrated through humanitarian emergency and international supervision, and from Serbia, which was commonly framed as the locus of regional instability and nationalist responsibility. The comparison illustrates how balkanist hierarchies of "civility" and "disorder" can shift across closely related contexts.

[3] The EU was able to impose the 55% threshold in the Montenegrin referendum due to its leverage, exercised through a combination of incentives and conditionality, namely the promise of future EU membership. In essence, it was an offer neither side could politically afford to reject. However, the EU's involvement in the process also entailed a degree of responsibility for managing its outcomes, regardless of the final result. Ultimately, it was the prospect of future EU membership that made the 55% threshold politically acceptable (Friis, 2007, p. 86).

Although Montenegro's independence was achieved through a formally democratic and internationally recognized process, it did not eliminate the deep internal divisions that preceded the referendum. Rather than constituting a clear rupture with its Balkan past, independence reshaped existing identity conflicts without resolving them. While aspirations toward Europeanization symbolized an effort to distance the country from representations of the Balkans as chaotic, persistent political polarization and institutional fragility continued to reproduce precisely those images commonly associated with Balkanist discourse. (Keiichi, 2007, p. 165-169). In the years following the referendum, these tensions assumed new forms and expressions, particularly through issues related to ethnic identity, religious disputes, and minority rights. In such an environment, the process of democratic consolidation becomes difficult and fragmented, as it often unfolds under the pressure of international actors and in the shadow of unresolved identity questions, rather than relying on internal political will and inclusiveness.

Although numerous arguments suggest that democratic consolidation does not necessarily have to be exclusively tied to the process of European integration, the case of Montenegro indicates that it was precisely European integration and the broader process of Europeanization that significantly directed the course of transitional reforms and shaped the model of political development. While democratization is theoretically considered primarily an internal process, examples from the region, including Montenegro, testify to the strong influence of external actors, primarily the EU, in its promotion. In the case of Montenegro, this influence is particularly reflected in the gradual and often sluggish process of democratic consolidation, which more closely reflects the necessity of meeting foreign policy criteria than fulfilling domestic democratic imperatives (Đukanović, 2019, p. 156).

Ongoing Challenges and Ethnic Tensions (2000s – present)

Despite the prolonged transition and the considerable involvement of external actors, the Balkan countries have continued

to struggle with the consolidation of a democratic order. Reform processes have remained incomplete, while the internalization of democratic norms has advanced only gradually. Montenegro represents no exception in this regard, having experienced a lengthy and ultimately unfulfilled transition. This process began during its membership in the state union with Serbia and extended into the post-independence period following the 2006 referendum. Although Montenegro was spared direct military conflict, it was nevertheless deeply affected by its broader regional consequences. Consequently, the transition proved protracted and failed to result in full democratic consolidation or the establishment of a stable liberal democratic system. (Đukanović, 2022, p. 217).

Following the 2006 referendum and formal independence, Montenegro entered a new political reality shaped by complex ethnic, religious and identity divisions that remain present nearly two decades after the restoration of independence. One of the most persistent sources of tension in the post-referendum period has been the relationship between Montenegrin and Serbian identity. While the 1981 census recorded approximately 68% of the population as Montenegrins and only 3% as Serbs, the 2003 census indicates a dramatic shift: 43% identified as Montenegrins and 32% as Serbs. These changes were not the result of demographic trends, but rather of political preferences, demonstrating that ethnic self-identification has become deeply intertwined with attitudes toward statehood and sovereignty (Morrison, 2009, p. 192).

Data from the most recent 2023 census confirm the persistence of deep social divisions. According to the Statistical Office of Montenegro (Monstat) and its official statistics, 41% of citizens identified as Montenegrins, while approximately 33% declared Serbian national affiliation (Monstat, 2024). These results indicate that national identity in Montenegro remains strongly conditioned by the political context, whereby citizens' self-identification continues to depend on the perception of the dominant narrative, attitudes toward statehood and the current political moment. This identity dynamic clearly shows that ethnic affiliation is

not a static category, but rather one of the means of expressing political attitudes and a sense of belonging or resistance, toward the structures of power and the state project as a whole.

In the period following the collapse of the one-party system, democratic reforms in Montenegro were slow and partial. Although there was a certain degree of pressure for reform, the absence of a clear political vision, as well as the continuity of elites from the previous regime, limited the potential for genuine democratization. The Democratic Forum, as an early attempt to gather political actors around new rules of the game, failed to gain traction, as members of the ruling establishment withdrew after the first disagreements. This revealed that decisions could still be made without achieving consensus. The wartime context, along with deeply rooted traditional values of Montenegrin patriarchal society, further hindered the democratization process and the inclusion of citizens in shaping the country's political future (Barjaktarović-Lanzardi & Podunavac, 2013, p. 187).

Another significant point of division in Montenegrin society emerged around religious identity, particularly after the adoption of the *Law on Freedom of Religion* in 2019. A large segment of the ethnic Serb population and the Serbian Orthodox Church perceived this law as an attempt to suppress their historical and institutional presence in Montenegro. This perception led to mass protests and religious processions (*litije*) throughout the country, mobilizing tens of thousands of citizens and contributing to the downfall of the long-standing rule of DPS in the 2020 elections (Freedom House, 2021).

The post-referendum development of Montenegro has been shaped by an ongoing struggle between competing identity narratives, further intensified by external influences and internal political rivalries. These dynamics resonate with recurring tropes in Western balkanist discourse, which tends to represent Serbia, Kosovo and Montenegro as identity-driven, politically volatile and institutionally fragile, although in different discursive registers and with different political effects. Despite its declared aspiration

toward Europeanization, Montenegro continues to grapple with internal divisions that complicate democratic consolidation and slow the pace of its integration into the EU.

These challenges are not unique to Montenegro. The entire Western Balkans region is grappling with prolonged transitional crises, political polarization and institutional weaknesses. In many cases, ethno-nationalism remains a key mobilizing resource for political elites, while democratization processes stagnate. As Florian Bieber (2018, p. 12-18) observes, similar patterns of authoritarian populism, identity-based tensions and foreign policy fluctuations are present in other countries of the region, suggesting that the post-Yugoslav space is confronted with structural challenges that transcend national borders.

Although the empirical focus of this chapter is Montenegro, the issues discussed should be situated within a wider post-Yugoslav and Western Balkan framework. Throughout the region, processes of democratic consolidation have been constrained by enduring identity divisions, politicized approaches to state-building, and the instrumental use of ethno-national narratives by political elites. Comparable patterns can be identified in Serbia, B&H, Kosovo and North Macedonia, indicating that Montenegro does not constitute an anomaly, but rather exemplifies structural challenges common to post-Yugoslav societies.

Cultural Heritage and Yugonostalgia

Following the restoration of its independence in 2006, Montenegro embarked on an intensive process of redefining its identity. This process encompassed not only political and institutional reforms, but also cultural transformations. Analytically, it is important to distinguish Yugonostalgia from balkanism: the former is anchored in the post-Yugoslav memory field, whereas balkanism operates as a broader European representational regime applied to the Balkans as a whole, including non-Yugoslav contexts. In contemporary Montenegro, identities are shaped at the intersection of memories of the Yugoslav past, European aspirations and Balkan realities. In this

context, Yugonostalgia, as an emotional and cultural connection with the former country, occupies a significant place in the collective consciousness, particularly among older generations and segments of the urban population (Velikonja, 2010).

Within Montenegro's cultural landscape, institutional and media practices, such as museums, archives, and festivals, serve as mechanisms for preserving the memory of the SFRY and as carriers of the reinterpretation of its cultural legacy. In his monograph *Titostalgia: A Study of Nostalgia for Josip Broz*, Mitja Velikonja (2008, p. 65-66) observes that Tito is "re-emerging in the public space through cultural productions, exhibitions, and commemorative events", wherein his figure becomes a medium of collective sentimental connection and symbolic capital. Thus, Yugonostalgia is not merely a retrospective gaze; it also reflects disappointment with the post-Yugoslav reality, marked by corruption, social insecurity and increasing political polarization (Volčič, 2007, p. 25-27).

In contemporary discourse, Yugonostalgia often manifests in several distinct forms. The first relates to the suppression of memories of Yugoslavia, particularly in the context of confronting nationalism, where Yugonostalgia itself takes on an anti-nationalist character as a response to increasingly pronounced nationalist rhetoric. The second form of Yugonostalgia has a cultural-social dimension, rooted in historical memory and the idea of a shared geopolitical space, which includes political Yugonostalgia. The third form is commercial or popular-cultural Yugonostalgia, present through various phenomena such as Titostalgia and nostalgia for Yugoslav music and symbols (Jagiełło-Szostak, 2013, p. 5). This form is especially pronounced among older generations, but also among younger people who did not live in the SFRY, but inherit memories through family narratives, education, and media (Palmberger, 2008, p. 361-362).

Yugonostalgia in Montenegro represents more than mere nostalgia. It constitutes an active cultural practice and a platform for identity-based critique. As Volčič (2007, p. 21-22) emphasizes, shared cultural memory is continuously constructed and reactivated

through media and popular culture, serving as a response to institutional uncertainty, societal fragmentation and ethnically exclusive identity constructs. Accordingly, the study of Yugonostalgia provides a valuable lens through which to understand contemporary processes of redefining cultural heritage and political narratives in Montenegro.

The cultural heritage of Yugoslavia in contemporary Montenegro cannot be viewed separately from the issues of memory, collective identity and selective institutional remembrance. Despite political efforts to distance from the Yugoslav past, numerous elements of that heritage remain integrated into everyday life, from urban planning and architecture (for example, socialist modernism) to educational narratives and public spaces that still bear names from the Yugoslav period (Kulić et al., 2012, p. 15-17).

The symbolic expressions of Yugoslav heritage are further reflected in toponymy and the naming of cities. During the existence of the second Yugoslavia, the capital of Montenegro bore the name Titograd, in honor of the lifelong president Josip Broz Tito. This was not unique to Montenegro, because each republic and autonomous province had at least one city named after Tito: Titovo Užice in Serbia, Titovo Velenje in Slovenia, Titova Korenica in Croatia, Titova Mitrovica in Kosovo, Titov Drvar in B&H, Titov Veles in Macedonia and Titov Vrbas in Vojvodina. Podgorica held the name Titograd from 1946 until 1992, when its original name was restored. These names represent a strong example of institutionalized cultural memory and political loyalty to the Yugoslav idea and its leader, and today they function as symbolic reminders of a shared historical experience (Perica, 2002, p. 90-91).

Despite efforts to marginalize the Yugoslav legacy from the official narrative, it remains present in Montenegro's culture of remembrance. Public debates, museum exhibitions, initiatives aimed at preserving modernist architecture and the continued appearance of Yugoslav motifs in popular culture testify to the persistence of this cultural-historical layer. This phenomenon reveals the multilayered dynamics of identity politics, in which the

past is perceived not merely as heritage, but as a resource for renegotiating current political and cultural positions. Through Yugonostalgia and memory culture, Montenegro continuously negotiates between different visions of the past and the future between Titograd and Podgorica, between the Balkans and Europe (Ibidem, p. 359).

Conclusion

The contemporary political and cultural history of the Balkans cannot be understood without examining the dissolution of Yugoslavia and its lasting consequences, both internationally and within the states that emerged from its collapse. Rather than focusing on a single conflict or national trajectory, this study has approached the post-Yugoslav space through the interaction of balkanist discourses, post-socialist state-building processes and competing regimes of memory. In doing so, balkanism and balkanization are treated as interpretative frameworks through which European political and cultural discourses have sought to explain conflict, fragmentation and perceived democratic delay in the region.

Montenegro's restoration of independence in 2006 unfolded within a specific historical and symbolic context, situated between the legacy of Yugoslav statehood and aspirations toward Europeanization. Although the referendum was formally democratic and internationally recognized, it did not resolve deep identity divisions, which remained salient and were frequently instrumentalized by political elites. Montenegro thus appears not as an exceptional case, but as an analytically useful lens through which broader regional dynamics can be observed.

The persistence of Yugoslav legacies in Montenegro, particularly through institutions of collective memory and popular culture, highlights the continued relevance of Yugonostalgia as a form of identity articulation and social critique. Comparable dynamics can be found across other post-Yugoslav societies, where memories of socialism, war and transition intersect with external balkanist representations. Yugonostalgia therefore does not negate

balkanist discourse, but coexists with it, offering alternative narratives that occasionally challenge dominant European portrayals of the Balkans.

Across Serbia, Kosovo and Montenegro, balkanist discourse has shifted over the past three decades, from explanations centered on war and "ancient hatreds" in the 1990s to contemporary framings structured around Europeanization, conditionality and democratic "delay". Yet this discourse has operated differently across cases: in Serbia through narratives of political culpability and authoritarian continuity, in Kosovo through frames of humanitarian crisis, international supervision and "unfinished" statehood, and in Montenegro through a comparatively "manageable" narrative of peaceful separation and conditional Europeanization. In this sense, Kosovo represents the outer limit of balkanist discourse, where the region is no longer framed merely as "problematic Europe", but as a space requiring permanent international governance.

Taken together, these cases demonstrate that processes of state-building and democratization in the post-Yugoslav region cannot be separated from the discursive frameworks through which the Balkans have been continuously interpreted within Europe. The limits of balkanist discourse become visible where local counter-narratives, such as Yugonostalgia or selective claims to European belonging, partially unsettle its hierarchical logic. The future of the region will therefore depend not only on institutional reform, but also on the ability to critically engage with inherited narratives and foster more inclusive political cultures.

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