

BALKAN NATIONAL REPUBLICS: BETWEEN VIOLENCE AND MALAISE

by Jakub Stepaniuk



Introduction

As evidenced by the results of Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom; the rising popularity of Marine Le Pen in France and Matteo Salvini in Italy; and the reforms conducted by the Fidesz or Law and Justice parties of Hungary and Poland, respectively, we can easily observe a common phenomenon. Both the *old* and the *new* Europe has started thinking in a *national* way. Transformation of political agendas within various segments of state governance including economic protectionism, reversal of historical policies, greater attention to the cultural demographics of a community, or public security can be inscribed into a general pattern of the so-called renaissance of nation states. In order to understand the meaning of this *renaissance* phenomenon, we have to bear in mind that only a couple of years ago, national epithets were usually associated with the irreversible past. Domination of liberal discourses underpinning Francis Fukuyama's vision of a globalised, democratic paradise shoved the idea of a nation state towards the old-fashioned ideological margins or dark sides of alternative online journalism. Governmental predecessors including Hungarian MSZP or Polish PO were too ashamed to tackle the issues of national identity as they believed the identity values lost their significance in wake of successful economic transformation. Representatives of the new national parties were expected to enter the public space by sneaking into private houses on colourful leaflets; no one however believed their flamboyant slogans could ever step into parliaments and executive offices. Annexation of Crimea, war in Donbas, cyber interference into elections, or terrorist attacks – all of these instances prove that European security or relative *Pax Europaea* are not the subjects of perpetual warranty, as antagonistic national interests still play a considerable role.

Nationalisation of governmental agendas is definitely a continuous process, but is it actually a pattern spreading equally throughout our continent? Let me focus for now on the geographical area of the Balkan Peninsula (sometimes known as Southeastern Europe). Indeed, any contemporary event encompassing politics (the most recent elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina), security (conciliatory dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina), as well as more social themes including sports (celebrating Croatian success at 2018 World Cup) or architecture (Skopje 2014 project) are predominantly defined through national discourses. It is worth pointing out, however, that in contrast to the rest of Europe, the *national renaissance* in Southeastern Europe cannot be limited to the last decade. Whereas Fukuyama's dream of economic and social liberalisation was usually realised by the governments of other post-communist states during

the (post)-transition period, the newly sovereign nations of the Balkans were drowning in a domestic slaughter aroused by the ideas that Fukuyama had sent to the ideological dustbin of history. As a result of profound wounds, post-war reconstruction in the late Twentieth Century only prolonged the dominance of national discourses, which continue today.

Hence, in this paper I would like to first explain Balkan exceptionalism, focusing on the ontological factors which have led towards different perceptions of the nation state. The analysis will then proceed to evaluate the major flaws within the current project of nation state building and conclude with an examination of possible alternative solutions.

Are the Balkans Actually Different?

Imagining the Balkans, written by the Bulgarian sociologist Maria Todorova, has been regarded as one of the most ground-breaking works attempting to conceptualise the notion of the so-called *Balkan otherness*. Having a parallel linkage with the theoretical assumptions derived from Edward Said's *Orientalism*, *Balkanism* can be recognised as nothing more than a demeaning Western stereotype portraying the region of Southeastern Europe in colours of backwardness, barbarianism, or despotism (Todorova, 2009). It is significant to emphasize the fact that *Balkanism* serves, in its essence, as an invented concept for particular, discursive means, whereas its emergence was virtually associated with distinct socio-political phenomena occurring during the pre-WWI period (Bakić-Hayden, 1995). Therefore, *eastern* or *oriental* epithets portray something to be politically fragile and sluggish. The constructivist origin of the *Balkanisation* concept is especially visible when juxtaposing it against the ones which it is supposed to address. Since the *Balkan ghost* of economic deficiency, sanguine lords, and callous violence floats around and does not determine any specific borders, anyone who can manipulate their own geography struggles to deny its regional affiliation and flees either to *better* Central (Slovenia, Croatia, Romania) or Western (Greece) *Europes*.

"If the Balkans hadn't existed, they would have been invented," claimed the German philosopher, Hermann Keyserling (Todorova, 2009). In his 1928 thesis, Keyserling ascertains that the existence of a conceptualised Balkan region within dominant, national, and comparative discourses ensures that somewhere in Europe exists something worse, lagging politically and economically. It's not very difficult to recognise the artificiality of *Balkanism* as particular deficiencies might occur anywhere. After all, Greater Serbia or Albania do not really differ in their essence from Greater Hungary or Italy. With a quizzical tone of Ziemowit Szczerek's *Intermarium*, social and political oddities observed in Poland are identified with allegedly similar oddities evidenced in Kosovo. This shows how universal the use of *Balkanisation* is, instead of criticising the quality of roads or mentality of people in *civilised* parts of Europe it is easier just to compare everything with Kosovo (Szczerek, 2017). Does it still make sense to apply Balkan exceptionalism in theoretical deliberations on nation state policies if apparently there is nothing really exceptional? Even though the constructivist perspective undermines the notion, I would like to present a couple of arguments supporting the idea of Balkan *otherness*, limited to the sphere of nation state perception. The reasons for the national renaissance in the Balkans (which has lasted for the past several decades, not just the past couple of years, as has been espoused by those in Western/Central Europe) stem from historical factors out of which I would like to identify the three major ones.

First, the Durkheimian modernity processes present in Western Europe during the Nineteenth Century perfectly fit nation state building projects. The governments of these states played an important role in the dissemination of obligatory and common education, the standardisation of dialects in the form of a common language, the emergence of inclusive culture, institutionalised bureaucracies, and rapid industrialisation; in sort, these projects acknowledged the special role the nation had in serving as a cementing ingredient of a given community. These applications of positive intervention by the state

demonstrate an utterly different understanding of reality when looking at the region of Southeastern Europe. As it arrived with serious delay, the purpose of national identity for the sake of constructing nation states was completely reversed and perceived as a consolidating factor against the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires. Increased national identity enabled and strengthened antagonisms, rising insurrection, and the eventual deconstruction of their administrations and authorities. This might explain the assumption why common application of nationalism primarily leads towards resistance against alleged foreignness and consequent use of violence.

Secondly, in contrast to the majority of Western and Central European states, the Balkan ethnic composition includes communities with a various distributions of identities divided along complex religious and traditional lines. Moreover, a lack of geographical separation has posed and continues to pose an enormous challenge to the efforts of establishing a relatively consistent and homogenous nation states in the region. This presumably explains the decision of the first group of post-Ottoman leaders who united the region and established a multi-ethnic state of Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (SHS) (renamed in 1929 for Yugoslavia).

Thirdly, no other European region possesses a strong Ottoman legacy (with exception for Hungary, although the Ottoman influence vanished there by the end of Seventeenth century). The presence of an Ottoman administration in Balkans, which lasted for more than five centuries, not only hampered the progression of modernity (which completely reversed the application of nationality in state building projects), but also influenced ethnic structures through partial Islamisation of Slavic populations in Bosnia. Such conversion profoundly mixed various ethnic communities to the extent where it was impossible to identify exclusive ethnic affiliations. Post-feudal model of social stratification was also deranged by favouring those who converted to Islam.

By understanding these three historical factors, we can better comprehend the reasons as to why the entire history of modern Balkan statehood was immersed in the issues of mutated national states, while its renaissance has been rampantly flourishing since the emergence of the SHS. What is less obvious, but genuinely worth mentioning in this analysis, is the existence of nation building concepts and efforts even during least expected periods, namely the socialist Yugoslav times. Dexterous manipulation between two extremes of the creation of pan-ethnic, Titoist Yugoslavian identity on the one hand and recognition of ethnic rights on the foundations of World War Two nationalism on the other, was a key tactic of the communists rulers in enabling the coerced existence of the federation. The awakening (or emergence) of a national identity among Macedonians or Muslim Slavs, the ousting of Prime Minister Aleksandar Ranković in 1966 for alleged unitary tendencies (associated with a fear of excessive Serbian domination), and the violent suppression of revived national identity during the 1971 Croatian Spring serve as arguments against those who believe that the issue of nationality was successfully quelled and vanished from Yugoslav policymaking (Sekulić, Massey & Hodson, 1994). Instead, these examples show a significant tenacity of nation state concepts regardless of the preferences for national sovereign separation or *fraternal* unification.



Is There an Alternative to Balkan Nation State Building?

What sort of political outcomes can we identify while reflecting on post-1995 efforts of nation state re-building in the Balkans? Croatia currently finds itself in the middle of reversing historical policies—seemingly attempting to assign the blame of inducing recent Yugoslav wars on Serbia. Moreover, the government is simultaneously scrubbing the record of its own cooperation with Nazi Germany which led to the creation of a fascist puppet Independent State of Croatia (NDH), whose leaders perpetrated massive ethnic cleansings in the Jasenovac concentration camp. The absence of agreement between Belgrade and Pristina presumably serves as one of the key reasons which is preventing Serbian progress in negotiations with the European Union. The most radical example, Bosnia and Herzegovina, since the end of the civil war has been notoriously threatened with separatist efforts of Serbian and Croatian constitutional entities while the political structure based on the Dayton agreement, instead of uniting and empowering, divides everyone and everything through subjugating any viable decision to identity concerns. If we would assume that nowadays political success can be measured by the condition of transparent and inclusive institutions enabling existence of democratic structures and economic prosperity, Bosnia would achieve a genuinely miserable feedback. Adding to this a pile of discrimination cases (Sejdić and Finci for instance), separationist education (e.g. national floors of primary schools) or national duplication of institutions even in the smallest towns only prove that nation state projects turn into ridiculous missions invigorating bureaucracy, providing more opportunities for corruption and slowing down reform processes due to structural complexities.

Let us focus on recent Macedonian politics and make a controversial assumption. The success of the so-called Colourful Revolution in 2016 and the establishment of a new socialist government resulted in achieving something which, during the authority of nationalistic VMRO-DPMNE, was perceived as unachievable – a breakthrough in relations with Greece and Bulgaria. Accomplishments including the enforcement of the Prespa Agreement and a friendship treaty with Sofia opened new paths towards profound reforms and comprehensive democratisation. They were positively received by European Commission, which in its most recent report suggested the possibility of initiating accession negotiations.

In observing these changes, we should ask ourselves why other Western Balkan governments have not yet embarked on Skopje's path which apparently proves that discarding national attitude in policy making precipitates reforms, enables democratisation, and makes the country more transparent and reliable for potential foreign investments.

However, political reality is slightly different. The reasons why the revolution was successful in Macedonia in 2016 and why it cannot erupt during ongoing protests in Tirana, Podgorica and Belgrade can be explained by the fact that, so far, no one has managed to capture the state better than the VMRO-DPMNE. In Macedonia, leaders who subordinated and corrupted the entire administrative structure, while simultaneously (and illegally) eavesdropping on more than 20 thousand people, polarised and outraged society enough to evoke rebellion. Although Aleksandar Vučić, Milo Đukanović and Edi Rama have timidly taken some steps in a similar direction, they are still too far from Nikola Gruevski's authoritarian trophies. Second, no one can assure that the currently protesting opposition in other Balkan states would follow Zoran Zaev's conciliatory path. Hence, there is a lack of confidence whether ventures such as Belgrade's natural recognition of Kosovo's independence or Banja Luka naturally approving decisions of federal government in Sarajevo would eventually take place. Third, a successful and democratic change has to be performed with a bottom up approach; undoubtedly, opposing the will of the people does not seem to be genuinely democratic. The challenge is not only ingrained in the fact that governments prefer national approach, it is also the attitude of the majority of population which these authorities represent. Even the case of Zaev should not be that idealised. For many, the concept of

“North Macedonia” is seen as nothing more than a callous betrayal and disgrace against an entire nation, which can explain the huge protests opposing the implementation of Prespa Agreement.

National Future?

A sudden withdrawal from the national discourses dominating the societies of Southeastern Europe does not seem to be very realistic. By agreeing with the assumption that nation states in Balkans are just inevitable, let us try to identify possible solutions which might *debalkanise* the region, prevent massive migration, and improve economic prosperity. Some time ago, *Balkan Insight* published a couple of commentary pieces outlying an interesting polemic between two academics: Jasmin Mujanović and Timothy Less. While both agree that national identity is going to shape further policies in the region, Mujanović hopes that ongoing languid efforts of developing civil society, recognizing the rights of national minorities, and improving inter-ethnic dialogue will eventually legitimise the sense of multi-national states. Any alternative sounds better than a violent confrontation meaning that the status quo should be maintained even for the cost of maintaining the current malaise state.

Alternative perspectives provided by Less critically assess the contemporary Balkans and suggest the need for an urgent change. At best this urgent change can be accomplished by redrawing state borders to ideally correspond to the ethnic divisions since fostering current inter-ethnic state would only deepen the despair we can observe. British academic repeats here the same narrative of local radicals saying that division of Bosnia or Kosovo apparently would solve all the regional problems. In case the division and homogenisation would make everyone happy I would like to just ask the advocates of these ideas how exactly they intend to perform them in political practice. How are they going to separate ethnically mixed regions and cities of Northern Kosovo, Sanjak or Bosnia, how intricate and unpractical the new borders would be, how three Muslim microstate entities of Bihać, Sarajevo and Novi Pazar would even function, how realisation of de facto Greater Albania vision would be approved by the rest of a new Balkan homogenous team, and, finally, how peacefully the new order would be accepted by the communities feeling unsatisfied with the new borders. More likely than not, the upcoming years are going to show consecutive outcomes of nation state policies. The fate of the deepening malaise terminating peacefully or violently lies in hands of leading executives and the maturity of their societies.

References

- Bakić-Hayden, M. (1995) Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of the Former Yugoslavia *Slavic Review* 54(4)
- European Commission (2019) *North Macedonia 2019 Report*, Brussels
- Less, T. (2017) Multi-ethnic States Have Failed in the Balkans, *Balkan Insight*
- Mujanović, J. (2018) Bosnia Will be Next if Kosovo is Partitioned, *Balkan Insight*
- Mujanović, J. (2017) New Partitions are the Last Thing the Balkans Need, *Balkan Insight*
- Sekulić, D., Massey, G. & Hodson, R. (1994) Who were the Yugoslavs? Failed Sources of a Common Identity in the Former Yugoslavia *American Sociological Review* 59(1)
- Szczerek, Z. (2017) *Międzymorze. Podróże przez prawdziwą i wyobrażoną Europę Środkową*. Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne
- Todorova, M. (2009) *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press