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Politics of identity as a threat

Dejan Ilic traces the long tradition of misinterpreting and misrepresenting Serbia in Western media as well as Serbia's notion of a "global conspiracy" that is being waged against Serbia – a concept that has been misused by the Serbian government especially in the wake of the Nato bombings. Why were these interests covered so successfully by such false images? And why did they prove so effective?

"Serbian Election Victory for War Crimes Suspect's Party" – under this headline, on December 29, 2003, Ian Traynor gave an account of the results of elections in Serbia – held the day before – for The *Guardian* readers. In order to explain to his readers what actually happened in Serbia on December 28, Traynor reports: "Nationalist extremists led by a suspected war criminal in custody in The Hague scored a clear victory in general elections in Serbia yesterday, dealing a huge setback to the prospects for stable democracy and western-oriented policy in the Balkan state." His brief depiction of the event is interwoven by phrases like: the parties led by war crime suspects "*beat a cluster of pro-democracy parties,*" or "*the fractious coalition of democrats who led the uprising against Mr Milosevic three years ago may yet be able to scrape together*" (my italics). On December 30, Traynor was already able to predict: "Analysts expect *international pressure* to result in a Kostunica-led coalition, *but do not expect it to last long*" (my italics). In other words, Traynor says that Serbian citizens voted for suspected war criminals (who won a "clear victory"), that Serbian pro-democrats are too weak to respond to this challenge (they are "fractious" and they are hardly "able to scrape together"), and, eventually, the international pressure is urgently needed, although it is doomed to fail. However, to make this dark picture of days to come in Serbia, Traynor overlooked or misinterpreted several important points. First, and very simple, nationalist extremists did not win at all. They received 27 percent of votes (which is a hundred thousand votes less than their leader won just a month ago in the failed presidential election, and also not much above their average electoral score), or 82 out of 250 seats in Serbian Parliament. Second, there was no any, "fractious" or not-"fractious", coalition or "cluster" of pro-democracy parties. These parties participated in the elections separately, and, as a matter of fact, taken together they won much more votes than radical nationalists, 42 percent or 124 seats in the Parliament. Furthermore, "pro-democracy" parties (including those who did not pass the threshold) won approximately the same number of votes as in the previous parliamentary election in 2000, except for one, Mr Kostunica's party, which left the pro-democracy coalition at the beginning of 2001. His party won several hundred thousand votes less than he scored only a year ago in the presidential election against another democratic candidate and the war crimes suspect – mentioned in The *Guardian* headline above – Vojislav Seselj. This actually means that Serbian citizens prefer those parties who stick to the principles and

goals proclaimed in September 2000, when Milosevic and other "suspected" war criminals were removed from power. Finally, it is quite possible to claim that "international pressure" actually contributed a lot to convince a certain number of voters to vote for nationalist parties. The question, then, is: how come that Traynor overlooked, or rather misinterpreted the aforementioned facts?

One of the answers to this question can point at a kind of a tradition of depicting ethnically distinguished actors in Yugoslav conflicts, a tradition established in the early 1990s¹ and highly developed in 1998 and 1999, during the Nato bombing of Yugoslavia. Its most extreme, hence illustrative version was produced by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, who identified Serbs (nearly all of them) with Nazi-Germans of the Second World War (*The Guardian*, April 29, 1999). At first sight, one is inclined to say that the discourse that created the "evil Serbs" served to justify international measures meant to solve the Yugoslav crisis, that is, to provide legitimation for political and military action of the United Nations, Nato, and governments of Western countries. Yet, it seems to me that it is too simple an explanation, oriented towards so called ethnic conflicts in the region of former Yugoslavia as a problem that has to be solved by the international community. That is, the created discourse is thus only meant to provide a framework for understanding and solving the Yugoslav crisis. However, I think that the discourse, although implicitly, also served to arrange social and political spaces in countries sought to stop the Yugoslav wars. To elaborate this thesis, let me go back to the late 1990s – the period of the Nato bombing of Yugoslavia.

In her text about the bombing, Drinka Gojkovic, among other things, retells and comments on a little anecdote, originally told by Michael Ignatieff and published in *The New Yorker* (January 1999). Drinka Gojkovic writes:

[D]escribing [Richard] Holbrooke's visit to [Slobodan] Milosevic to discuss the Kosovo crisis, Michael Ignatieff notes that Holbrooke had met representatives of the Serbian opposition. At one moment, writes Ignatieff, Veran Matic, the editor-in-chief of Radio B92, took Holbrooke aside and asked him "Why do you always speak with a single negotiator?" Holbrooke retorted by asking "And with whom are we supposed to talk?" Then, according to Ignatieff, Matic shrugged eloquently. From the reader's point of view the picture is effective: eloquent shrugging, nothing to say, utter devastation, but from the point of view of somebody interested in local (and not merely Serbian) affairs it incites an angry cry. Could Matic not have replied? In fact Matic did reply: "I enumerated..." and goes on to list a range of names of people who would have a lot to say about Kosovo and everything else. (Gojkovic 1999)

Though interesting, this anecdote would have been insignificant if it did not, again, reveal a more general pattern of how the situation in former Yugoslavia had been presented in the West, or, at least, in Western media. As Drinka Gojkovic points out:

Ignatieff counterfeited the reply with an effective image. The story would be a trifle if it did not point to a system. The West has always systematically bypassed serious conversation with the Serbian alternative, forever treating it as a sort of peculiar

handy decor in an otherwise perfectly monochrome space.
(Gojkovic 1999)

To Drinka Gojkovic's comment one could add that this little story about the journalist's honesty and dishonesty in a certain way embodies a whole bunch of stereotypes concerning the relation between Yugoslavia and the West, that have been extremely effective during the past fourteen years. Moreover, it does not embody only Western stereotypes on Serbs and Yugoslavia, it as well embodies those stereotypes that are officially promoted by the Serbian regime for mostly internal use.

On the one hand, it could be said that it is in accordance with the goals of Western official policy to simplify things and present former Yugoslavia as a "perfectly monochrome space." Or, more precisely, as a space inhabited exclusively by two kinds of creatures: monstrous Serbs and innocent Albanians, at that moment. The same pattern was also used before, at the time of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia, and the role of the monstrous aggressor was again played by Serbs, and Croats and Muslims changed retrospectively their places in the role of the innocent victim. As far as the Serbs are concerned, the phrase "perfectly monochrome space" is quite suitable. According to the majority of Western representations of Serbs, almost all Serbs are the same (brutal and genocidal), they think the same (nearly all of them are nationalists, and those who are not – they are few, weak and fractious), and they could be simply and correctly identified with their former leader Slobodan Milosevic, and other inmates in The Hague.

On the other hand, it had evidently been extremely convenient for the Serbian regime to create the impression that the whole world was against the Serbs, that there was a global conspiracy against their interests, and that the only way for Serbs to survive was to follow their leader and his wise policy. The "catastrophic" consequences that Serbs suffered from were not the results of the possibly wrong policy of the leader. On the contrary, they would have suffered more if it had not been for his wise policy.

At this point, one is to come to the conclusion that described strategies of justifying two different kinds of policies are in fact compatible. The obviously false image of Serbs created by Western media served as a sufficient proof for the thesis of a global conspiracy against the Serbs launched by the Serbian regime. The bombing was its ultimate confirmation. In these circumstances, all failures of the policy of the regime could be, and in fact were, easily presented as the effects of a global anti-Serbian policy. On the other hand, the number of unexpected and obviously disastrous consequences (for instance, the huge number of Albanian refugees who flooded the neighbouring countries only after the Nato attacks were launched) of superficial Western policy toward former Yugoslavia could be and in fact were easily presented as the results of mean Serbian official policy behind which stood a unified, "perfectly monochrome" Serbian nation. In his essay "End of Serb Misery?" Stojan Cerovic, one of the most prominent Serbian journalists, particularly known for his political analyses, described this as follows:

In any case, no one wants to go any deeper into it. Serbs are guilty of everything that has been done to others in their name, guilty of having the regime they have and of having the ruined country they have. The Nato bombs were presented as a way to help them, as a medicine which the ungrateful Serbian organism rejected. And, after all, Milosevic is still there, he's

still talking about victory and he's still promising reconstruction of the country. This proves that Nato hasn't finished the job, but as Nato can't be less than perfect and certainly not guilty of anything, this has also been added to the catalogue of Serbian guilt. (Cerovic 1999)

Indeed, all of these observations and evaluations are highly questionable, yet it is not the purpose of this paper to articulate and argue for any final judgement about aforementioned issues. However, one is inclined to argue that underneath the described stereotypes there were interests merely dominated by power games. The question that I will try to answer then is: Why were these interests and exercise of power both in and out of former Yugoslavia covered so successfully particularly by *these* false images?

When one is talking about the false images and stereotypes of something, one usually assumes that there ought to be something like a true description of the same thing. However, for this discussion one does not have to present the truth: it is a matter of common sense that the stories about the global conspiracy on the one side and about the unified tribe of natural born killers on the other side cannot be true. Yet, no matter whether they are true or not, it turns out that both stories were effective to the highest degree. Thus the question could also be phrased as follows: Why were these false images needed and, after all, effective?

Finally, it is beyond doubt that Serb forces committed horrible crimes in Kosovo. To go further into the past: it is beyond doubt that the Serbian regime severely violated human rights of Kosovar Albanians. Was that not enough to justify Western measures against former Yugoslavia and its regime, and, eventually, to justify Nato air campaigns? There were many who thought that these indeed were enough. However, it turned out that for those who make decisions these reasons were not sufficient and that they needed a little bit stronger moral support. Or, one could say, the justification was not the only goal of the media campaign that created an image of evil Serbs. So, what *was* the other goal?

I will try to answer these questions relying on Maria Todorova's book *Imagining the Balkans*. However, it will turn out that this book sets certain limits that prevent one from a thorough explanation of the described phenomena. After all, it could be said that the whole story is centred on the set of problems of the *other*. Therefore I find that theoretical works of Julia Kristeva, as well as works of Mary Douglas, are of great help for understanding some of the aspects of what happened in and around former Yugoslavia.

Since former Yugoslavia, i.e. Serbia, is a part of the Balkans (although Maria Todorova would add: *unwillingly* part of the Balkans), the perception of former Yugoslavia is to the certain degree predetermined by the perception of the Balkans, or the existing stereotypes of the Balkans. Therefore, it seems logical to start analyzing current images of Serbia and Serbs created in the West with the brief survey of Maria Todorova's book *Imagining the Balkans*. By referring to a great number of historical and literary sources and political documents Maria Todorova is successful in describing how the Balkans, i.e. the Balkan states and people, were and are viewed from the outside – to be precise, viewed by the West; as well as how the Balkan peoples perceive themselves. In other words, Todorova's book could be understood as a reaction "against a stereotype produced *in* the West," yet a reaction articulated with the awareness

that "there are substantial differences within and between the different 'western' discussions of the Balkans" (Todorova 1997: ix). However, in spite of "substantial differences," *Imagining the Balkans* demonstrates, rather obviously, that one common feature is persistent in all discussions of the Balkans, no matter whether the Balkan issue is discussed among the Balkan or among the Western authors: namely, the Balkans is always viewed as a space of ambiguity, a border area, an intersection of different cultures and civilizations. In Todorova's words:

What practically all descriptions of the Balkans offered as a central characteristic was their transitional status. The West and the Orient are usually presented as incompatible entities, antiworlds, but completed antiworlds. [...] The Balkans, on the other hand, have always evoked the image of a bridge or a crossroads. (Todorova 1997: 15)

We are to understand the Balkans' "transitional status" in many ways: geographically, politically, culturally, or in terms of two or even more different, bordering or overlapping civilizations. Eventually, Todorova suggests that we are to understand it chronologically as well: "The Balkans are also a bridge between stages of growth, and this invokes labels such as semideveloped, semicolonial, semicivilized, semioriental" (Todorova 1997: 16).

However, one is inclined to say that this "transitional status" cannot be viewed as a designating characteristic of the Balkans, that is, a characteristic which differentiates it from other regions. Even Todorova herself offers a few examples of a similar designation of some other regions. "According to Szucs," she writes, "Hungary carried the predicament of a border region between two opposing centers" (Todorova 1997: 142). She also gives an account of the case of Czeslaw Milosz, who wrote: "I was born and grew up on the very borderline between Rome and Byzantium" (Todorova 1997: 143). Still, Todorova argues that the designations of these other regions have "short-term cultural/political potential" and in comparison to them, the Balkans demonstrates "its powerful historical and geographic basis" that makes these concepts "methodologically incomparable, and therefore incompatible constructs" (Todorova 1997: 160).

It seems that Todorova could use one more, at first sight rather odd argument. Szucs's Hungary and Milosz's Wilno were not exposed or have not been permanently exposed to the consistent derogation of the West as it was the case with the Balkans. In other words, the "transitional status" as a designating characteristic of the Balkans could be confirmed by the specific attitude that the West has been exercising over the Balkans during the last century. Not only it "does not need special proof," Todorova argues, "that the Balkans have been described as the 'other' of Europe," through the term 'Balkanization,' the Balkans "also had become a synonym for a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian" (Todorova 1997: 3). Adjectives like "tribal," "primitive," "barbarian" are not only derogative, they also denote a certain quality of being dangerous. This need to discredit the Balkans in such a way indirectly confirms its genuinely ambiguous status in the eyes of the West. Maria Todorova explains this by referring to Mary Douglas's book *Purity and Danger*:

As Mary Douglas has elegantly shown, objects or ideas that confuse or contradict cherished classifications provoke pollution behavior that condemns them, because "dirt is

essentially disorder." These confusing or contradicting elements Douglas calls ambiguous, anomalous, or indefinable. [...] Thus, ambiguity is treated as anomaly. Because of their indefinable character, persons or phenomena in transitional states, like in marginal ones, are considered dangerous, both being in danger themselves and emanating danger to others. (Todorova 1997: 17)

Though it seems that the framework of Mary Douglas's theory offers quite appropriate tools for understanding the mechanisms that function underneath the existing Balkan stereotype, Todorova needs to widen it by introducing the following explanatory model based on the work of Arnold van Gennep:

This in-betweenness of the Balkans, their transitional character, could have made them simply an incomplete other; instead they are constructed not as other but as incomplete self. Enlarging and refining on Arnold van Gennep's groundbreaking concepts of liminality, a number of scholars have introduced a distinction between liminality, marginality, and the lowermost. While liminality presupposes significant changes in the dominant self-image, marginality defines qualities "on the same plane as the dominant ego image." Finally, the lowermost suggests "the shadow, the structurally despised alter-ego." (Todorova 1997: 18)

At first sight it is not clear why Todorova needs to widen the theoretical framework provided by Douglas. However, as one advances through Todorova's book, he or she realizes that the major concept of Todorova, explicitly articulated in *Imagining the Balkans*, is that the Balkans are – or ought to be viewed as – nothing else but the geographical, historical, political, and cultural part of Europe, or, more precisely, though implicitly, of the West. That is the reason why she introduces the concept of the lowermost. This concept provides a possibility to view the Balkans as the West, and yet, at the same time, as opposed to, or despised by the West. Therefore, one could proceed to analyze the Balkan contradiction on two levels: one level is opened by the theory on purity and danger of Mary Douglas, and the other is opened by the concept of the lowermost.

Some 25 years after the publishing of *Purity and Danger* in her essay "Risk and Blame," Mary Douglas explains that the task of her famous book was "to vindicate the so-called primitives from the charge of having a different logic or method of thinking" (Douglas 1992: 3), and concludes that she fulfilled the task:

In *Purity and Danger* the rational behaviour of primitives is vindicated: taboo turns out not to be incomprehensible but an intelligible concern to protect society from behaviour that will wreck it. (Douglas 1992: 4)

However, she regrets that she "left the book without making any link between taboo-thinking, which uses natural dangers to uphold community values, and our modern approach" (Douglas 1992: 4). In other words, she admits that in *Purity and Danger* she fails to emphasize that there is a basic similarity between so-called primitive societies and civilized societies, i.e. a common ground for understanding social behaviour in both of them: namely, in both kinds of societies one is facing the "rational behaviour" whose goals are to

"uphold community values" and to "protect society from behavior that will wreck it."

In her essay "Thought Style Exemplified," Douglas suggests that this "rational behavior" can be viewed in extended terms of Ludwik Fleck's concept of a "thought style":

Ludwik Fleck argued that any community (which he called a thought–collective) developed its own thought style, a more or less disciplined, consensually agreed set of principles about how the world is, and what is a fact and what is speculation. (Douglas 1992: 211)

The main feature of a thought style, Douglas claims, is "taboo–behavior." "Every culture," she explains, "protects some matters from questioning by declaring that enquiry about them is impossible" (Douglas 1992: 212).

Following Fleck's idea, it is possible to describe a thought style as a general framework of norms and principles within which members of a community place their experience in order to interpret it and establish its meaning. Since a thought style differs from one community to another, it is obvious that it is not a kind of universal or ultimate knowledge or framework, although within a certain community it is usually manifested or represented as such. Therefore, it is also possible to say that it is meant neither to provide truth nor a firm ground for the search of truth. Since every culture protects some presumptions, principles, norms, or values from questioning, by declaring that it is not possible to scrutinize them, it turns out, following Douglas's extension of Fleck's concept, that thought style can be viewed instead as a web of presumptions, principles, norms, and values, that keeps a certain community together, that is, prevents it from falling apart.

In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas claims that "the ideal order of society is guarded by dangers which threaten transgressors" (Douglas 1988: 2). Threat of danger is created within a system, that is, by a thought style. Douglas argues that "ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system," that can be formed only by "exaggerating the difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against" (Douglas 1988: 4). In other words, Douglas claims that establishing an order is possible only through forming strong hierarchical binary oppositions. Anything that does not fit in the established patterns of these binary oppositions in a way violates the order and ought to be seen as a matter out of place, or dirt. However, the very notion of dirt implies a system of defined relations, as well as an opposition to that system, which means that dirt is somehow an element of it: "Where there is dirt there is system" (Douglas 1988: 36). Therefore pollution could be viewed as one element of the general binary opposition, the other element being the order. It turns out that there are two simultaneous steps of introducing an order or a thought style: the first is to establish a general opposition between an order and disorder and the second is to present disorder as excluded from a system, though it is necessarily an essential part of it. One more thing is important: an order is not a permanent, stable, unchangeable structure. As Judith Butler demonstrates in a number of her essays on gender issues,² an order is continuously in a process of establishing and confirming itself through the reinforcement and renewal of its binary oppositions. Furthermore, an order is a product of a compromise between real needs and abilities within a society and its wishful thinking, presenting thus an image of how one society would like to

perceive itself. Therefore, the lower members of hierarchical binary oppositions that create an order could be viewed as undesired characteristics with clear negative values that a society wants to get rid of. As a kind of pollution, these characteristics ought to be externalized and isolated.

It is possible to say that characteristics associated with the Balkans – "reversion to the tribal," "backwardness," "primitivism," "barbarism" – constitute the lower part in the general hierarchical opposition created by the West. Obviously, the higher part is to be described in the terms of "progress," "order," "prosperity." It seems that the Balkan region has served as a convenient screen on – or behind – which undesired features and values could be projected – or hidden – following the logic that "we" (the West – civilized, democratic, developed societies) are not like that. Therefore, it could be said that the Balkans (indeed, not only the Balkans) serves as a kind of "constituting other" of the West, i.e. the bearer of all the negativity.. From this standpoint, the difference between the concepts of "purity and danger," on the one side, and of the "lowermost," on the other, is insignificant: the different, "dirty" *other* could always be presented as the "despised alter-ego."

However, one may object, and with good reason, that social, political, and cultural differences between the Balkans and the West are, unfortunately, obvious and in favour of the West. That means that there has been real ground for establishing the existing oppositions between the Balkans and the West. Having that in mind, it seems that it is less important how these differences are instrumentalized, and what mechanism could be revealed underneath this instrumentalization. Yet, it would be interesting to discuss the real nature of these differences, for it can shed a different light on the whole issue and make functional the concept of the lowermost, that is, the concept of the "despised alter-ego."

In her thorough analyses of the Balkan stereotype, Maria Todorova repeats rather often that what the West, facing the Balkans, "loathed to see was not its self-image from the dawn of humanity, but its image of only a few generations ago" (Todorova 1997: 41). Among the examples of this claim, Todorova offers the following one:

It is, of course, a sublime irony to observe the leaders of the cleansed societies of Western Europe fifty years after their ugliest performance raise their hands in horror and bombard (in words and in deed, and safely hidden behind American leadership) the former Yugoslavs in preserving "ethnic diversity" for the sake of securing a *Volksmuseum* of multiculturalism in a corner of Europe, after having given green light to precisely the opposite process. (Todorova 1997: 186)

According to this, it turns out that the West is particularly reactive to the Balkan "transitional status" understood in a specific, chronological way. Discussing the events from the beginning of this century, Todorova claims that in an ambience created in Europe from the eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century, "in which the national was imposed as the hegemonic paradigm," or "as the gold standard of "civilized" political organization," rise of nationalism and the formation of nation-states in the Balkans could be hardly viewed as a coincidence (Todorova 1997: 167). Yet, precisely the two Balkan wars are to be blamed for the coining of the pejorative term "Balkanization" by which the West expressed its contempt toward the behaviour of the Balkan

people. Thus, the Balkan people are different from the Western nations in a very specific way: they remind Western Europeans of themselves a few generations ago. It follows that an animosity of the West toward the Balkans is actually an animosity toward itself, an animosity that could be understood as a negation of one's own origin. Underneath the exaggeration that created the Balkan stereotype there is probably the mechanism of self-negation that ought to create an acceptable self-image or self-identity.

Having in mind that the creation of one's own acceptable or desired identity is conditioned by the rejection and denial of one's own self, one is tempted to use the theoretical work of Julia Kristeva as an explanatory model. In her book *Powers of Horror*, influenced by, among others, Douglas's *Purity and Danger*, Kristeva explains that

[t]he abjection of the self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being. There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded. (Kristeva 1982: 5)

Yet, in this particular case Kristeva could also mislead by claims such as this one: "There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture" (Kristeva 1982: 2). Following such statements, one could easily slip into the one of the most persistent stereotypes of the Balkans as "the cradle of the Western civilization." However, Kristeva's concept of the *other* as the self rejected or denied in order to form one's own identity could be used as an explanation of a complex structure of the relationship between the Balkans and the West, by providing a ground for understanding that in this relation, from the standpoint of the West, "the Balkans" and "between" are of less significance than the West itself. In other words, this relation could be rightly reduced to the relation of the West toward itself.

In her essay "Might Not Universality Be Our Own Foreignness," from a book *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva, following Freud's insight that the archaic narcissistic self, not yet established, "projects out of itself what it experiences as dangerous or unpleasant in itself, making of it an alien *double*, uncanny and demoniacal," clarifies that

[i]n this instance the strange appears as a defense put up by a distraught self: it protects itself by substituting for the image of a benevolent double that used to be enough to shelter it the image of a malevolent double into which it expels the share of destruction it cannot contain. (Kristeva 1991: 183–184)

The "strange" in this sentence could be also read as the *other* or "despised alter-ego." The interesting thing is that Kristeva does not see the relation between the *self* and the *other* as necessarily hostile. In the essay "Toccatina and Fugue for the Foreigner," she argues that "the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder," and concludes: "By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself" (Kristeva 1991: 1).

Now, one could return to one of the questions posed in this paper: what was the purpose of creating an image of evil Serbs? My point is that although the Serbian regime and the Serbian regular and paramilitary forces did enough evil to be exposed to the appropriate legal measures of the international community, that is still not sufficient to justify and legitimize severe accusations that were raised against the whole Serbian nation, or, to be precise, against citizens of Serbia. It seems that these accusations are of less significance in the realm of foreign policy of the Western democratic and developed countries than in the realm of their own internal affairs. If one is to take into account the situation in former Yugoslavia, he or she ought to ask how come that the guilt of the Serbian side is not spread more selectively, in a range from those who are the most responsible to those who are responsible only indirectly? Where did the need to present Serbia as a monochrome space inhabited by suspected war criminals and their supporters come from? Probably it would be a little bit easier to answer these questions by taking into account some of the main features of the current situation in Western Europe: for example, the fact that the national/ethnic feelings of Western European citizens which are obviously still strong are on collision course with the equally strong efforts toward the creation of the European Union. Among others, Yasemin Nuhoglu Soysal in her article "Changing Citizenship in Europe" elaborates this issue depicting evident contradictions of European unification and stressing an intensification of ethnic separatist movements and a rise of far-right-wing parties and their successes in national elections in almost all member-states of the European Union. By accusing Serbs of nationalism, West, i.e. representatives of governments of EU member states loyal to the concept of the European Union: a) create the impression that there is no nationalism in their countries, and b) indirectly threaten their own nationalists. Thus, it could be said, among other things, that representations of Serbs were, and still are, the means which the politicians who promote integrative ideas use to homogenize their own communities around the particular idea and the project of the European Union.

This can also explain why, within the framework of the dominated discourse on the Yugoslav crisis, it was necessary to reduce the complex mixture of causes of the conflicts merely to their ethnic aspect. Alternative discourses were offered as early as in 1992. For instance, explaining the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the "modernizing" processes in Eastern Europe, Klaus Muller highlights economic causes rather than ethnic ones: "In this respect, the independence movements in the Soviet Union constitute a novel phenomenon. The fatal, late consequences of setting up rule along ethno-federalist lines become visible when the question was one of distributing the costs for financing the transition to a market economy, instead of distributing growth" (Muller 1992: 130). Furthermore, he states that Soviet ethnic policy "allowed certain ethnical groups to constitute themselves as republics, thereby creating a 'national' awareness" (Muller 1992: 130). Thus, Muller's argument is completely in accordance with the argument provided by Rogers Brubaker and Frederic Cooper in their essay "Beyond 'identity'":³ "Although antinationalist, and of course brutally repressive in all kinds of ways, the Soviet regime was anything but not anti-national. Far from ruthlessly suppressing nationhood, the regime went to unprecedented lengths in institutionalizing and codifying it" (Brubaker 2000: 25–26). The same goes for former Yugoslavia (except for the part on brutality), and the explanatory model that combines economic, political and, eventually, ethnic aspects was evidently already formulated to enable comprehension of the crisis. And yet, the story about "deep-seated animosities among the country's diverse ethnic and religious groups," as well as about the inability of the state to deal with ethnic grievances – told by, for instance,

Cohen⁴ – prevailed.

By no means do I intend to abolish the Serbian side from its responsibility. As I said, I just want to understand why the vast majority of Western media and a number of intellectuals created the biased perception of it, the perception whose outcome was disastrous. As far as the perception of Yugoslavia and Serbia is concerned, an interesting twist has occurred. It seems that the events in the region of former Yugoslavia perfectly fit into the already existing patterns of the Balkan stereotype. Yet, this could be turned the other way around: the Balkan stereotype actually predetermined the understanding of the events in the region of former Yugoslavia. In her brief account on the bombing of Yugoslavia, titled "The Balkans: from Invention to Intervention," Todorova emphasizes that the war in Yugoslavia cannot be seen as a Balkan war. On the contrary, she argues that at one moment it became an undeclared European, or even a world war, since 19 nations launched a military action against one Balkan country (Todorova 1999). In the final chapters of her book *Imagining the Balkans*, she also protests against the practice of Western media to present the Yugoslav war as a Balkan war. Beyond doubt, Todorova is right: it was definitely not the Third Balkan war. Yet, her complaints demonstrate how the already existing negative Balkan stereotype was imposed on the understanding of the situation in former Yugoslavia.

One could still object that it is hard to believe that such a logic is inherent only in the Western behaviour toward the Serbs, among all the other Balkan, or other former Yugoslav ethnic groups. If we follow this explanatory model, the same should go for the Croats as well. Since it is not the case, it seems that this explanation could not be consistently defended. Indeed, at the abstract level this explanation does not function. Yet, we are not dealing with abstract issues. A number of real short-term and long-term political and economic interests were and still are interwoven in the events in the region of former Yugoslavia, and their fulfilment was and is legitimized in many different ways. Ultimately, I am trying to understand and explain why the particular patterns were used in presenting the Serbian side in the war. After all, my point is that this Western representation of the Serbs says, indirectly, a lot about the West itself and comparatively little about the Serbs. The same could be rephrased as follows: the Western representation of the Serbs says a lot about the West itself, since Serbia metonymically stands for the Balkans, and they are, after all, following Todorava's argument, part of the West.

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¹ For instance, in his study *Broken Bonds*, published in 1993 and reprinted in 1995, Lenard J. Cohen rightly posed the question "why that state's disintegration spawned such widespread, protracted, and barbarous violence." However, he offered an inadequate answer to it: "Three closely related factors [...] are particularly significant for understanding the intense violence associated with the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia: first, the persistence and intensification of deep-seated animosities among the country's diverse ethnic and religious groups, who lived together rather uneasily in the Balkan region for centuries but who shared membership in a common state from only 1918 to 1991; second, the desire of many Yugoslav citizens to redress grievances arising from the violent bloodletting among the ethnic groups during World War II; and, finally, the failure of the communist regime's nationality policy and modernization programs to resolve outstanding, albeit temporarily submerged, interethnic grievances and to engender a substantial basis for long-term interethnic tolerance" (Cohen 1995: 328). Cohen treats ethnic groups as monolith, unchangeable actors in spite of evidence of, for instance, interethnic marriages whose percentage was quite high, especially in Bosnia, where the conflict was most brutal.

² See Butler, 1990, 1993, 1997.

³ See also Brubaker 1996.

⁴ See footnote 1.