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Thinking Europe without thinking

Neo-colonial discourse on and in the western Balkans

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EU member states draw upon a reservoir of colonial discourse to assert superiority over the extra-European Other; western Balkan states compensate by turning the same discourse against neighbours lower down the ladder of EU accession, writes Tanja Petrovic.

“The so-called unification of Europe appears to be carried out with little thought,” wrote Jelica Sumic Riha and Tomaz Mastnak in the journal *Filozofski vestnik* in 1993. [1] Their critical attitude was primarily determined by the bloody events in former Yugoslavia, which Europe had failed to prevent by, among other things, not supporting efforts to democratize Yugoslavia. In the years that followed, it was primarily academic circles that were critical of EU institutions and EU-related discourses created at the national and supra-national levels. By contrast, the two most “vociferous” EU-related discourses – the political and media discourses – have continued to demonstrate a serious lack of reflection.

Today, “Europe” as notion or idea has been almost completely equated with the EU; membership of the EU is the main tool for shaping the new symbolic geography of the continent. Those countries already within the EU can include or exclude, while those who are “on their way to Europe”, or those who do not have the option of membership at all, are excluded. Mitja Velikonja has called this discursive practice in which the notions of Europe and European are equated with the EU “the original sin” of the new Eurocentrism: “Under the pretence of simplification, abbreviation or eloquence (*euloquence?*), the two terms are simply equated – the political



and economic unit appropriates the geographical and historical name of the entire continent.” [2] In this process, “the very process of accession to the EU actually shows how non-European countries may be transformed into European ones”. [3]

What can these discourses tell us about the character of contemporary Europe? And how is the symbolic geography of Europe reflected in the area designated as the “western Balkans”, which to a great extent corresponds with the space of the former Yugoslavia?

The western Balkans as colonial Other

The contemporary search for European identity may be intense and dedication to the task earnest, but viewed from a historical perspective the idea is relatively new: until the fifteenth century, the name “Europe” was used only sporadically and had no special weight. [4] Only in the mid-fifteenth century, with the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, did the notion of “Europe” start to function as a “bearer of the common conscience of the West” and bulwark against the hostile Turk. Today, “unable to invoke the threat of communism, the developed West has found a new bogey again in Islam [5] At the same time – this should be emphasized – other already established European “Others” – colonial, Semitic, eastern European – have lost little or nothing of their “otherness”.

The image of the Balkans as an internal or “semi” Other has a special position in a context in which some European countries are members of the EU while others are attempting to obtain that status. On the one hand, the western Balkans are seen as part of Europe both geographically, historically and in terms of civilization (as European and local politicians emphasize), however they have a lot of work ahead of them before they can become “European”. On the other hand, within this ambiguous space “in which some countries’ Europeaneity is given, while others have to work for it”, [6] discourse on the accession of the western Balkan countries appears as an ideal arena for the shaping of a new European orientalism.

To understand better processes leading to this new orientalism, historical legacy is a useful analytical category. Historical legacy, unlike tradition, is not the result of consciously choosing certain elements from the past; rather, it “encompasses everything that is handed down from the past, whether one likes it or not”. [7] Historical legacy cannot be changed, though



it can be evoked or concealed, glorified or made taboo, depending on one's present aspirations.

Colonialism, as a historical legacy of western European societies, has become the historical legacy of the EU as a whole. Although it is a dark part of European history, European politicians nowadays openly refer to the colonial past of their societies. In the case of the western Balkans, the reproduction of colonial relations takes place through the long-established image of the Balkans as a periphery to be supervised and administered, one that needs continual assistance from the European centres of power. In political discourse, the EU accession process of the western Balkan countries is represented not merely as a profound transformation: to implement this transformation, they need assistance and guidance along the way. Such "tutelage" implies that the region is "at a lower level on the evolutionary scale" and cannot "progress by itself, but requires external guidance to avoid slipping into the mistakes of the past". [8]

The idea that a kind of colonial administration in the Balkans is indispensable for maintaining peace and enabling the development of the entire European continent was frequently echoed in articles, essays and pseudo-academic literature throughout the 1990s. For Robert Carver, [9] the only solution for endless unrest in Albania is "European-enforced order and industry" and a reinvigoration of "the centres of ultimate power" that pertained in "the old colonial days". Robert Kaplan, in *Balkan Ghosts*, [10] today cited as an example par excellence of Balkanism, states that "only western imperialism - though few will like calling it that - can now unite the European continent and save the Balkans from chaos". Writing in the early 1990s, Michael Ignatieff saw the absence of great powers as the reason for conflict in the Balkans, commenting that "in the Balkans populations find themselves without an imperial arbiter to appeal to. Small wonder then, that, unrestrained by stronger hands, they have set upon each other for that final settling of scores so long deferred by the presence of empire". [11] In an article in *The Guardian*, Julian Borger wrote that "a 'benign colonial regime' was necessary for democratic development in Bosnia. [12]

The approaches employed by the "international community" for administering first Bosnia-Herzegovina and then Kosovo in the wake of the war in former Yugoslavia display many colonial traits, as pointed out by researchers who have studied the discourse of the main political bodies within the international administration. [13] The "international community's



mission" was explicitly represented as a *mission civilisatrice*, where its representatives were to use a series of measures to teach the Balkan nations democracy and respect for law. This discourse operated in synergy with long-entrenched images of the Balkans as a region urgently in need of colonial supervision, along with new exclusion mechanisms introduced by the EU accession process. The democratization process, necessitating some kind of colonial administration, is a prerequisite for the *Europeanization* of the Balkan countries. [14]

The new European context, in which colonialism becomes historical legacy of the European Union, enables the political elites of states without a colonial past to appropriate colonial discourses. This appropriation, completed without reflection or "filtering" through historical specificities, is illustrated in the public statement of EU politicians. For example, in June 2007, just before Portugal assumed the EU presidency, the Portuguese Permanent Representative to the European Union, Alvaro de Mendoca e Moura, stated that, because of its colonial history, "Portugal's focus in foreign policy will be cooperation with Africa, and human rights will be in the foreground. 'We cannot simply chase away from the table the countries that violate human rights with which we sit at the same table.'" [15] Several months later, while Slovenia was preparing for taking over the EU presidency from Portugal, the *Financial Times* quoted Janez Jansa, the then Slovenian prime minister, as saying that "in the region, Slovenia has interests that are similar to Portugal's interests in Africa". [16] Similarly, Slovenian MEP Jelko Kacin established a parallel between the interests of a colonial power in relation to its former colony (here, in fact, an imperial power and its former territory) and interests of Slovenia in the western Balkans, stressing that "Austria's behaviour in Slovenia is similar to Slovenia's behaviour in southeastern Europe. [17] The only criterion and justification for drawing such parallels is EU membership. EU membership creates a shared "reservoir" of discursive patterns for producing "otherness" when referring to those who are not part of the united Europe. As a rule, these patterns are exploited by the states whose "Europeanness" is not unequivocal, regardless of whether they are EU members.

Slovenia's EU membership also plays a central role in openly racist discourses. One example of such discourse was a message from a construction company addressed to seasonal workers from Bosnia-Herzegovina, posted in March 2008 on the containers in which they live in the Ljubljana district of Bežigrad. It warned the workers against trying to



practice their “culture and behaviour, which in some cases is extremely inappropriate. You should be aware that you currently live in Ljubljana, the capital of the Republic of Slovenia, an EU member state. Here we observe laws and rules that are of a higher level”. This example of discourse involves the typical central European cliché of an ordered environment inhabited by cultured citizens who will not tolerate any kind of newcomer or guest worker disturbing their urban idyll. In this case, “dirty southerners” are no longer southerners from other republics of the former Yugoslavia, whose position back then was much better despite ghettoization and widespread stereotypes. Nor does this group comprise other seasonal workers from Slovakia or other eastern European EU member states, the legal treatment of whom is different; moreover, low wages and poor living and working conditions attract only few workers from these countries to Slovenia (contrary to expectations after Slovenia joined the EU).

The open invocation of colonial patterns when referring to the western Balkan countries should also be viewed in its wider, economic context. While Austria is the largest foreign investor in Slovenia and one of the most important investors in the western Balkans, the largest part of Slovenia’s foreign investment is in Serbia. In 2007, the southeast European region accounted for one-sixth of all Slovenian exports. For Slovenia, too, the western Balkans are an “area of expertise” and the most important market and “sphere of interest”: here, expertise on the western Balkans is inseparable from economic influence, and discursive patterns and the power relations behind them are mutually supportive.

European colonialism Balkan style

One of the important characteristics of orientalist discourse, particularly evident in the case of the Balkans because of its ambivalent nature as “internal Other”, is the ability of the discourse to “divorce from colonial structures”. [18] For this reason, societies that are subject to orientalizations may internalize, reinterpret and modify it for the purpose of their internal demarcations and negotiation of their own identity. Milica Bakic Hayden’s concept of “nesting orientalisms” in former Yugoslavia is an excellent illustration of how individual Yugoslav nations employed the orientalist discursive mechanism to present themselves as western/European/superior and other nations as eastern/Oriental/inferior. [19] Maple Razsa and Nicole Lindstrom show how, under Franjo Tudjman’s presidency, the Croats distanced themselves from their southern and eastern neighbours,



exploiting the same stereotypes about the Balkans used by western politicians with reference to Croatia. [20]

Dominant discursive patterns on the western Balkans shaped in European centres of power by politicians of EU member-states and EU officials are appropriated and internalized in the former Yugoslav societies in order to redefine mutual relations. It is the holders of power in countries closer to EU membership who claim the right to shape discourses identical to those in which, in the wider context, their own nations are the subject. For example, after the arrest of Radovan Karadzic in 2008, the then Croatian prime minister Ivo Sanader stated that, regardless of this important step taken by Serbia, Croatia will enter the EU earlier than its neighbour: “We expect the new Serbian government and the Serbian President to remain on the same course and we keep our fingers crossed for them,” adding the almost inevitable paternalistic promise of assistance: “Croatia will support Serbia along this course”. [21] When Slovenia tried to block Croatia’s accession negotiations, Sanader made use of the situation to emphasize the hierarchy among candidate Balkan countries: “Slovenia blocks Croatia on its way to the EU, but Croatia will not do the same to its neighbour in revenge, and when Croatia sits at the European table it will not behave towards Serbia as Slovenia now behaves towards Croatia”. [22] The Serbian minister of foreign affairs, Vuk Jeremic, subsequently stated that “Serbia is ready to help Bosnia and Herzegovina on its road to the EU”. [23]

The appropriation of discursive patterns from the EU, without reflection, filtering or adaptation to local circumstances can be attributed to the nature of political relations in contemporary Europe: new member states, i.e. the former socialist countries that had to “prove” their *Europeanness* before joining the EU, must continue to do so even as EU members; at the same time, the advantages perceived to come with membership are openly reduced to economic interests (by both old and the new members). When rationalizing the significance of “European integration” in their pre-election campaigns, politicians in candidate Balkan countries refer to what they expect to have the strongest impact on voters: higher living standards, faster economic development, financial support from the EU, visa-free travel and so on.

This creates a situation where there is no room left for dialogue on how European citizens, or people living on various part of the continent, understand the meaning of European values. The debate on “Europeanness”

inevitably remains entrapped in the colonial discourse of western (western European, today EU) domination and is articulated exclusively by “true Europeans”, i.e. those living inside the EU. Some see positively the fact that the accession to the EU of the former socialist states of eastern and southeastern Europe is not final proof of their Europeanness, arguing, for example, that “accession did not result in total ‘melting’ of new members – it seems that in the enlarged EU there is a better chance for articulating alternative visions of Europe”. [24]

However, political practices and discourses, both in the countries of “new Europe” and in those still waiting to obtain this status, leave little hope for developing an emancipatory discourse of Europeanness. On the contrary, there is only an unreflected appropriation of patterns shaped in “real Europe”, with discourses of Europeanness serving only for obtaining cheap political credit.

Is Europe possible?

In his lecture at Thessaloniki in 1999, Étienne Balibar pointed out that “the fate of European identity as a whole is being played out in Yugoslavia and more generally in the Balkans”. Europe has two options, according to Balibar: “Either [it] will recognize in the Balkan situation not a monstrosity grafted to its breast, a pathological ‘after-effect’ of underdevelopment or of communism, but rather an image [...] of its own history, and will undertake to confront it and resolve it and thus to put itself into question and transform itself. Only then will Europe probably begin to become *possible* again. Or else it will refuse to come to face-to-face with itself and will continue to treat the problem as an exterior obstacle to be overcome through exterior means, including colonization.” [25]

A look into European discourses on the western Balkans shows that Europe has not become any more possible since Balibar made this comment. One could even argue to the contrary: that the means used to constitute the western Balkans as an area outside Europe have become even more explicit; that the use of mechanisms of supervision and colonization is characterized by an even greater lack of reflection; and that these means have become accessible to all those inside the EU. The main economic beneficiaries of this symbolic and discursive colonization of the Balkans are precisely those countries that most frequently make use of these mechanisms: EU members located on the EU’s southeastern border. As for Europe as a whole,



colonization enables it to maintaining a self-satisfied image while shunning, or ascribing to those outside, everything that might challenge this image.

This kind of Europe is not capable of self-reflection. In this kind of Europe, the media repeat politicians' statements echoing patterns that marked the darkest periods of European history. It is difficult to avoid an unpleasant feeling of repetition, despite the deep-rooted opinion that repetition of the past is a problem of the Balkan peoples, and by no means of Europeans.

Footnotes

1. Tomaz Mastnak, Jelica Sumic Riha, "Questioning Europe", *Filozofski vestnik* 2 1993, 7-11.
2. Mitja Velikonja, *Evroza -- kritika noveg evrocentrizma*, Beograd: XX vek, 2007, 17.
3. Ibid. 17-18.
4. Peter Burke, "Did Europe exist before 1700", *History of European Ideas* 1(1) 1980, 23-29. Cited in Tomaz Mastnak, "Iznajdba 'Evrope': humanisti in vojna proti Turkom", *Filozofski vestnik* 1/1997, 9-24.
5. Gerard Delanty, *Inventing Europe: Idea, Identity, Reality*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 1995, 150.
6. Andrew Hammond, "Balkanism in Political Context: From the Ottoman Empire to the EU", *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 3(3) 2006, 6-26.
7. Marija Todorova, "Sta je istorijski region? Premeravanje prostora u Evropi", *Rec*, 73/19 2005, 81-96, 88.
8. Hammond, *Balkanism*, 19.
9. Robert Carver, *The Accursed Mountains: Journeys in Albania*, London 1998.
10. Robert Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts*, 1993.
11. Cited in Hammond, *Balkanism*, 20.
12. Ibid.
13. Danijela Majstorovic, "Construction of Europeanization in the High Representative's Discourse in Bosnia and Herzegovina", *Discourse & Society* 18 (2007), 627-651.
14. See Majstorovic, *Construction*, 630.



15. In: 24ur.com, June 11, 2007.

16. In: *Mladina*, 4 August 2007.

17. In: *Mladina*, 14 March 2004.

18. Kathrynne Fleming, "Orientalism, the Balkans, and Balkan historiography", *The American Historical Review* 105(4) 2000, 1218-1233; 1224

19. Milica Bakic Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia", *Slavic Review* 54/4 1995, 917-931.

20. Maple Razsa, Nicole Lindstrom, "Balkan is Beautiful: Balkanism in the Political Discourse of Tudjman's Croatia", *East European Politics and Societies* 18(4) 2004, 628-650.

21. In: b92.net, July 28, 2008.

22. In: b92.net, December 19, 2008.

23. In: b92.net, October 22, 2009.

24. Orlanda Obad, "Imperij kao uzvraćanje udarca: predodzbe o kulturi i identitetu u hrvatskih pregovarača sa Europskom unijom", *Narodna umjetnost* 46/2 2009, 111-127; 113.

25. Etienne Balibar, *We, the people of Europe?*, Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2004, 6.