Introduction: Constructing Balkan Identity in Recent Media Discourses

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The initial concept for this special section emerged from a broader project focusing on discursive identity construction in South Slavic media and is a result of our continued interest in various aspects and strategies of forming and deconstructing identity in public discourse, including the role of symbolic geography in these processes.[1] The term *identity construction* reveals our view of identity, be it personal or social: we see it not as a stable, substantial category but a dynamic, context-dependent one that is always linked to the creation of difference—an image of the Other is needed to create and manifest one's own identity. We use the terms *Other* and *othering* in line with nationalism studies. Othering highlights and reinforces similarities among a national collective's members by emphasizing the Other's distinctiveness.[2] A nation, a community, or a group sharing certain values, is defined through an "us versus them," or "inside versus outside," dichotomy. In addition to a given group's inward-looking self-consciousness, its differentiation from the out-group also plays an important role in their identity construction.[3] We see public discourse as the main platform for negotiating cultural and national identities and the media as a powerful producer of identity patterns.[4] Along this line of thought, this group of articles explores how recent media commentary constructs a Balkan identity that has been historically signified through the dichotomy between "European" and "Balkan."

For centuries, western Europe based its self-image on the rationalist ideals of the Enlightenment, at the same time endeavoring to differentiate itself from the ferocious, irrational, and barbaric Balkans. Larry Wolff has shown how Europe was constituted within the domain of masculine reason, whereas the Balkans signified femininity and irrationality.[5] Similarly, Dušan Bjelić points

1. This bilateral project, "Media Constructions of Balkan National and Cultural Identity in Transition: From Yugoslavia to Europe," is conducted at the University of Ljubljana and the University of Oslo.

2. See Seyla Benhabib, "Introduction: The Democratic Moment and the Problem of Difference," in Seyla Benhabib, ed., *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* (Princeton, 1996), 3–18; and Ruth Wodak, Rudolf de Cillia, Martin Reisigl, and Karin Liebhart, *The Discursive Construction of National Identity* (Edinburgh, 2009).

3. See, for example, Anna Triandafyllidou, "National Identity and the 'Other,'" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 4 (1998): 593–612.

4. Sabina Mihelj, *Media Nations: Communicating Belonging and Exclusion in the Modern World* (Basingstoke, 2011).

5. Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, 1994).

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.74.2.237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

out that the Balkans has traditionally been viewed as backward, a seething pit of racial and sexual violence against which liberal, enlightened Europe has defined itself.[6] The Balkans has functioned as the fulcrum on which Europe's positive self-image is established; progressive Europe has projected its anxieties and forbidden desires onto this peripheral Other. This organized system of knowledge, termed *Balkanism*, is akin to Edward Said's concept of Orientalism.[7] Like Orientalism, Balkanism as a notion of identity is organized around the binaries of rational versus irrational, center versus periphery, and civilization versus barbarism.[8] However, according to many scholars, although there are some similarities and parallels between these concepts, they are far from being the same.[9] Three crucial differences, explored by Katherine Elizabeth Fleming and by Milica Bakić-Hayden and Robert Hayden, are as follows: Orientalism is the western conception of a distant Other, whereas the Balkans represents Europe's resident alien—an internal Other. Colonialism was not experienced in the Balkans as it was in North Africa, as the imperial mechanisms at work in the encounter between the Ottoman Turks and the Greeks were dramatically different from those at play in the Napoleonic encounter between the French and the Egyptians. Finally, in contrast to Orientalism, Balkanism as an academic discourse does not rest on earlier academic traditions because it emerged during Yugoslavia's disintegration, when the Balkans became a major topic of scholarly writing.[10]

Therefore, following Bakić-Hayden and Hayden, a Balkanist framework should be applied when analyzing representations of the Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav story. Because of its long history, the old symbolic geography of this Europe-Balkans opposition was reinforced during socialism, when western democracy and capitalism were opposed to the totalitarian, socialist east. Socialism became the new ideological Other, replacing the Balkans as the cultural Other. Under socialism, part of Balkan identity was related to Yugoslavia and the other part seemed homogeneous with western Europe, although the region's self-perception has always been more complex and heterogeneous. Though a great deal of effort was put into ensuring mutual tolerance and equality between the Yugoslav republics from the start of the socialist period, significant differences in political and economic models emerged, with vast gaps in regional development along with ethnic, cultural, and religious differences, resulting in antagonisms between them.[11] These disparities became

6. Dušan I. Bjelić, "Introduction: Blowing Up the 'Bridge,'" in Dušan I. Bjelić and Obrad Savić, eds., *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), 1–22.

7. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1979).

8. See Bjelić, "Introduction."

9. See ibid.; Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford, 1997); Milica Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia," *Slavic Review* 54, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 917–31; and K. E. Fleming, "Orientalism, the Balkans, and Balkan Historiography," *American Historical Review* 105, no. 4 (October 2000): 1218–33.

10. Fleming, "Orientalism"; Milica Bakić-Hayden and Robert M. Hayden, "Orientalist Variations on the Theme 'Balkans': Symbolic Geography in Recent Yugoslav Cultural Politics," *Slavic Review* 51, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 1–15.

11. Susan L. Woodward, *Socialist Unemployment: The Political Economy of Yugoslavia, 1945–1990* (Princeton, 1995).

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.74.2.237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

more obvious in the late 1980s, when, after Josip Broz Tito's death, Yugoslavia began to disintegrate into separate states—Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Macedonia, and Montenegro. As a consequence of this dissolution, the Balkan region has undergone significant social, political, cultural, and economic changes that have also strongly influenced the broader European sociopolitical landscape.

Although during socialism, *Balkan* could have been substituted with *communism* or *socialism*, the postsocialist period reintroduced it as a common signifier for the region. The term has reappeared to once again provide the frame for constructing the region as Other and for the region's self-identification as such. Returning, then, to Maria Todorova's studies of Balkanist discourse, we see that stereotypical images ascribed to the Balkans since the early modern period, such as barbarism, backwardness, tribalism, and primitiveness, are still widely present within and outside the region. Moreover, two former Yugoslav countries are now EU members. It seems that Europe's historical signification of the Balkans as its Other reemerged precisely with EU enlargement, which allowed for the differentiation between old and new member states.

Although the collapse of socialism introduced democratic political systems and a free market, these factors have not significantly changed western Europe's image of the former Yugoslav region. Patrick Hyder Patterson argues that within the region, Slovenia has been considered the most central European and therefore the least Balkan of the former Yugoslav republics.[12] However, he identifies in early 1990s Austrian and Italian media a mixture of discourses that construct Slovenian identity as central European, on the one hand, while reverting to Balkanism and stereotypes, on the other. During the 2000s, when Slovenia and Croatia were in the process of entering the European Union, both countries were still represented as Britain's and Germany's Other in some spheres of public discourse (for example, travel writing and media).[13] When Slovenia held the EU Council presidency, in 2008, its self-perception as a democratic European state did not entirely match Europe's traditional perception of the country. The sample texts we collected from German and Austrian media dating from the period immediately before and during the first six months of the Slovenian presidency reveal an ambiguous image: Slovenia is sometimes central European, sometimes Balkan, and sometimes both. Although the dominant metaphor in Slovenia's presentation is as a "model pupil," that very metaphor is often based on positioning

12. Patrick Hyder Patterson, "On the Edge of Reason: The Boundaries of Balkanism in Slovenian, Austrian, and Italian Discourse," *Slavic Review* 62, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 110–41.

13. Ibid. See also Andrew Hammond, *British Literature and the Balkans: Themes and Contexts* (Amsterdam, 2010); Andrew Hammond, *The Debated Lands: British and American Representations of the Balkans* (Cardiff, 2007); Bakić-Hayden and Hayden, "Orientalist Variations"; Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms"; Ingrid Hudabiunigg, "Slowenien in der deutschen Presse," in Karmen Teržan Kopesky and Teodor Petrić, eds., *Germanistik im Kontaktraum Europa* 2, vol. 1, *Literatur* (Maribor, 2003), 346–61; and Ingrid Hudabiunigg, "The Otherness of Eastern Europe," *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 25, nos. 5–6 (Winter 2004): 369–88.

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it within a metaphorical Balkan space.[14] However, the postsocialist transition and EU expansion played a significant part in the newcomers' new patterns of identity formation. Slovenia and Croatia, being geographically placed in the so-called western Balkans, have attempted to Balkanize other former Yugoslav republics in order to distance themselves from their Balkan roots and socialist past. Bakić-Hayden and Hayden argue that Balkanism is a practice of subjectification by which all ethnic groups in the former Yugoslav region define the Other as that which is east of them.[15] In so doing, they not only Balkanize the Other but also occidentalize themselves as west of that Other.[16] Therefore, the transition period seems to have mostly reinforced the differences affirmed in socialist times. In both Slovenian and Croatian media, the rhetoric emerging during the process of their joining the European Union seemed to polarize the notions of "western European" and "Balkan" in order to mark the countries' identity shift. Slovenia's and Croatia's distancing from socialism and from Yugoslavia was expressed as delimiting them from the signifier "Balkan" and attaching it to whatever or whomever is located beyond their eastern borders. The negative connotations of "Balkan" in commentary within and about Slovenia and Croatia are often neutralized by their belonging to the "western Balkans." This allows them to be identified with western European tradition and civilization and avoid their falling solely under the signifier "Balkan."[17]

More extreme attempts to delimit the former Yugoslav republics from each other are evident in various forms of nationalism. In addition to distancing themselves from different types of everyday phenomena and popular culture (such as food and music), Slovenians and Croatians have attempted to affirm their new national identities by insisting on their uniqueness. This was reflected in the invention of new words for items of western provenance in Slovenian and Croatian, such as *zgoščenka* (CD) and *zrakomlat* (helicopter), respectively. In Croatia in the 1990s, purist attitudes, primarily directed against anything considered a Serbianism, resulted in intensive lexical changes that were partly related to readopting certain outdated vocabulary into active use (for example, military terms such as *časnik* [officer]).[18] Remembering

14. See, for example, Marion Kraske, "Deutsche vom Balkan," *Der Spiegel*, December 31, 2007, at spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-55231875.html (last accessed February 10, 2015).

15. Bakić-Hayden and Hayden, "Orientalist Variations."

16. See Bjelić, "Blowing Up."

17. See Tanja Petrović, "Dolga pot domov: Reprezentacije zahodnega Balkana v političnem in medijskem diskurzu" (PhD diss., Mirovni inštitut, 2009); and Dubravka Kuna, "Diskursna analiza imenovanja i opisa naroda i država u hrvatskom dnevnom tisku" (PhD diss., University of Osijek, in progress).

18. See Snježana Kordić, *Jezik i nacionalizam* (Zagreb, 2010); Mario Grčević, "Some Remarks on Recent Lexical Changes in the Croatian Language," in Radovan Lučić, ed., *Lexical Norm and National Language: Lexicography and Language Policy in South-Slavic Languages after 1989* (Munich, 2002), 150–63, at www0.ids-mannheim.de/prag/sprachvariation/fgvaria/croatian_lexical_changes.pdf (last accessed February 10, 2015); and Keith Langston and Anita Peti-Stantić, *Language Planning and National Identity in Croatia* (Basingstoke, 2014).

https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.74.2.237 Published online by Cambridge University Press

pre-socialist traditions became crucial in reconstructing national identities. However, various forms of banal nationalism have provided a "front" for the complex forms of ethnic chauvinism that have poisoned the former Yugoslav republics in the past decades.[19] War crimes, ethnic cleansing, genocide in Bosnia and Croatia, and the administrative removal of some non-Slovenian former Yugoslav citizens from Slovenia's register of permanent residents (the "Erased") are just a few examples.

The question of how national foundation myths can be merged with European identity is a challenge for Slovenia, Croatia, and now Serbia. As the first ex-Yugoslav country to join the EU, in 2004, Slovenia has oscillated between the desire to adopt a new European identity and preserving its national and cultural sovereignty.[20] Although Slovenia is following western European concepts of democracy and human rights, the issue of the Erased has not yet been resolved. A bundle of nationalist ideas of an ethnically clean country has merged with European Enlightenment-based ideas and values. However, applying the European Union's gold stars to diverse features of the social landscape—from political parties to bread and cookies—seems to have been only the beginning of Slovenian Europeanization, which resulted in a curious social neurosis in the early 2000s.[21] Croatia has been undergoing a similar process since 2013. In public discourse starting in the 1990s, Croatia's past was tied to the radical Other (the Balkans and Serbia), whereas its present and future were connected to the west and the EU.[22] After joining the EU, following a decade of difficult political and economic reforms, Croatia's economy continued to struggle with high unemployment and low investment, despite reforms that allowed the center-right opposition to challenge the policies of the center-left government, gain the support of conservative civic groups and the Catholic Church, and refocus on a few contested issues, such as Serbian language rights, gay marriage, and sex education in schools. Meanwhile, Serbia finds itself in a postsocialist, pre-EU-accession in-between that remains heavily loaded with Euroskepticism and nationalism publicly supported by leading politicians. There seems to be little advancement toward tolerance and greater social inclusion. The latest manifestation of this problem was the 2014 gay pride parade, which took place after a four-year moratorium. It was organized and attended by about one thousand people from the local and international LGBTQ community in Belgrade. The event, which was allowed but not supported by public officials, was protected by seven thousand police. It was followed a few hours later by a fiercely anti-LGBTQ march, attended by a couple thousand people, organized by the conservative nationalist movement Dveri, which is closely connected to the Serbian Orthodox Church.

For each former Yugoslav country, these transitional processes of Other-

19. See Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London, 1995).

20. Mladen Dolar, "Slovenska nacionalna identiteta in kultura: Navodila za uporabo," in Neda Pagon, ed., *Nacionalna identiteta in kultura* (Ljubljana, 2003), 21–36.

21. See Mitja Velikonja, *Evroza: Kritika novega evrocentrizma / Eurosis: A Critique of the New Eurocentrism* (Ljubljana, 2005).

22. See Nataša Zambelli, "East of Eden: A Poststructuralist Analysis of Croatia's Identity in the Context of EU Accession" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2011).

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ing and attempts at identity construction create a basis for vivid discursive dynamics that are reflected in the media. However, Othering seems nothing more than a practice of sliding signification that comes in handy during identity consolidation. It is indeed true that the construction of identity involves establishing opposites and otherness, whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and reinterpretation of their differences from "us."[23] However, the Other is never a permanent or stable category with unchanging characteristics but an empty signifier injected with a set of changeable meanings, features, and characteristics aimed at defining it.

The articles in this special section address the latest phase (2008–12) of the transition period in Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia, focusing in particular on those countries' media. The aim of this issue is to explore how the media reflects the changes and negotiations in recent national identity construction there. The authors explore recent media discourses' attempts to avoid what Fleming identifies as a problem in western European and North American discussions of the Balkans, namely, their tendency to overlook important differences between countries, regimes, and peoples. Having this in mind, all three articles seek to transcend the simplified understanding of national identity as a homogeneous opposition of "us" (Europeans) versus "them" (the Balkans). They seek to analyze phenomena beyond this frequently examined dichotomy, to identify and explore new parameters of Balkan self-definition and new modes of Balkanization. All three articles present a critical perspective on media texts, directly and indirectly addressing national identity as it is constructed in different genres.

Andreja Vezovnik explores Slovenian journalism and canonical literature in order to show how victimization functions as a constitutive foundational myth in Slovenian national self-identification and how the logic of victimization is transposed to the former Yugoslav Other to legitimize its presence in Slovenian society. Her main claim is that the victimization and desubjectivation of former Yugoslav immigrant workers represent a new frame for Europe's gaze on the Balkan Other.

Breda Luthar and Andreja Trdina explore the often forgotten components of class and gender in female celebrities' performances of national identity in Slovenian and Croatian tabloid magazines. The authors assert that class, gender, and nationality have become the new defining categories of social difference in these two transitional societies and argue that celebrity discourse is one of the central locations for the analysis of cultural shifts in gender, nationality, and class in postsocialist society.

Tanja Petrović explores the role of parody and reflexive self-criticism in deconstructing national identity in postsocialist—but not yet European—Serbia by examining the fake news published on the well-known website Njuz.net. She discusses how the site's writers and readers negotiate its content and how it parodies social and political conditions within a broader neoliberal frame. This article also examines the meaninglessness of EU politicians' performative rhetoric and its appropriation by new and potential EU members.

23. Said, *Orientalism*, 332.

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Whereas some realms of public discourse, such as that of political elites in Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia, have frequently been studied in examinations of identity construction, so far little to no attention has been given to others, such as digital communication, tabloids, and satirical media. The analyses in this issue indicate that these mediums offer new perspectives on discursive identity construction and on the role of the opposition between the Balkans and Europe.

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