
The EU and the Balkans: Shifting Meanings after the Crisis

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Summary

This article discusses to what extent meanings and discourses on ‘EU membership’ on the one hand and on the ‘Balkans’ on the other, have shifted within Western Balkan countries in the past few years as a result of financial crisis in the European Union. Focusing on Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the article uses Derrida’s deconstruction to problematize the return of terms such as ‘Balkan’ and ‘Balkanized’, as a way to explain failures of the economic system. The article concludes that in the case of BH and to a lesser extent in Kosovo, there has been a de-mythicization of the EU.

Keywords: Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Derrida, Euro-crisis, Balkans

Introduction

The relations between the EU and the Western Balkans¹ are characterized by a rocky trajectory of progress, detachment and cautiousness. From the 1990s onwards, the changing political and economic landscape of the Western Balkans has had its impact on the way both parts construct their relations. Even though neither the EU, nor the Western Balkans, or the Balkans for that matter, can be looked at as ‘monoliths’, a series of turbulent memories in the Balkan peninsula (i.e. World War I) and events (i.e. the break-up of Yugoslavia) have had a significant impact in the construction of the EU’s narratives towards the Western Balkans. Since the 1990s, the EU has been oscillating between the EU as a virtually promised peaceful future for the Western Balkans (EU membership) on the one hand, and the EU as a cautious entity with regard to its ‘hospitality’ (EU membership) towards the Western Balkans on the other.

This article explores *how* narratives in the Western Balkans with regard to the EU changed after the Euro-crisis. Mapping new narratives (as in meanings) that

¹ Western Balkans is a term mainly used by the European Union for countries in South-East Europe which are not part of the European Union.

have come out throughout and after the Euro-crisis, the article argues that while the 'euro-crisis' itself has had its impact in the way the EU is perceived in the Western Balkans, it was the wave of protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo which further de-mythicized the EU and more broadly the EU future for the Western Balkans. The article concludes that the Euro-crisis coupled with the wave of protests mark a new detachment in EU-WB relations, albeit not an explicit one.

To problematize and interpret the narratives of both camps, I use 'deconstruction' as conceptualized by Jacques Derrida. Being in the contours of post-structuralism, deconstruction offers a unique possibility in analysing discourse and text, and in unveiling their shifting character. Deconstruction, or as Derrida calls it 'intervention', "de-totalizes self-enclosed totalities by placing them face to face with their internal differentiation enabling us to see the partiality of the partial, not by itself giving an absolute reading, but by attempting to show that no absolute reading is at all possible" (Nuyen, 1989).

In the case of the Western Balkans, my focus will be on Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. Internally, both countries have been subjected to a long and structural EU presence, which was instrumental in setting the paths both countries were to take. Externally, both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo have the echo of being 'international projects' with the EU being their greatest donor per capita in the world. In addition to the dependence on financial assistance, the dependence of both countries on the EU is enhanced by their peculiar sovereignty consolidation.

In January 2014, hundreds of demonstrators demanded the immediate resignation of staff at the University of Priština over allegations of corruption and plagiarism. Ibrahim Gashi, the rector of the university, stepped down from his position after being accused of having published work in a phony Indian-based academic journal. The wave of protests continued with further demands of the protesters "to release the University of Pristina from corrupted and unprofessional academic staff who have taken these positions through political partisanship and nepotism" (Kadriu, 2014). A dozen protesters and policemen were injured. A month later, in February, protests kicked off in the city of Tuzla, where the laid-off workers of five bankrupted factories staged a protest to get their unpaid pensions and health insurance back (Vermeersch and Dejaeghere, 2015). The wave of protests spread across the country, marking this as the biggest protest wave the country has seen since the end of the war. Arsenijević argued that "protests and plenums are the only genuinely novel development in Bosnia and Herzegovina since the end of the war in 1995" (2014). Immediately after the first demonstrations in the industrial town of Tuzla on February 7, the protests brought about the formation of the first plenum, a local citizens' assembly – based on direct democratic participation, involving hundreds of people (Hajdarpašić, 2014).

A Snapshot of the EU in the Western Balkans

The Western Balkans in general, and BH and Kosovo in particular, have been present in the EU's discourse and foreign policy agenda since the 1990s. After the 'Kosovo crisis' in 1999, the EU opened the possibility of 'virtual membership' for the Western Balkans on grounds of 1) the proclaimed solidarity of the EU with crisis areas and 2) the duty to help those plagued by catastrophes (Solana, 2000). The EU's enhanced support in the 'virtual membership' is particularly vivid in the cases of BH and Kosovo due to the unprecedented structural and conceptual presence in both countries. For the first time in its history, the EU is in the process of building its future member states, by supporting their state-building and aid programs (Musliu, 2014). These future member states are to exemplify 'genuine' EU member states, given that both are structures that float between independent states, (semi)protectorates and post-modern entities, among others.

To exemplify, both Kosovo's and BH's state identity elements (flag, national anthem, constitution) have more resemblance with the EU than any other old/new EU member state. Their sovereignties are transferred to Brussels, what Chandler has coined as inverse sovereignty (Chandler, 2006). Both countries are constitutionally declared to be multi-ethnic states, even though, in the case of Kosovo, the Albanian majority comprises over 90% of the population. A couple of questions are imperative to problematize in this regard. Does this make BH and Kosovo the first *genuine* EU countries? Is the EU expected to be more hospitable, as in willing to make the two countries part of the 'European family', given the EU's financial and conceptual support in making them *genuinely* 'European' (Musliu, 2014)?

Since Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans*, a lot has been written on the meanings and discourses as representational to EU-Western Balkans relations. A plethora of literature analyses the impact of the Euro-crisis on the EU's external relations, EU enlargement, etc. (see Karasavoglou and Polychronidou, 2013; Turcilo, 2013; Bechev, 2012). According to De Ville and Orbie (2014), the vast literature on the Euro-crisis is dominated by rationalist accounts of a financial assessment of the crisis. The social and identity dimensions affected by the crisis are largely neglected, let alone contributions that take a more epistemological turn on concepts and narratives affected by it. Whereas most discursive accounts embark on post-colonial and double-reading approaches evidenced in the work of Edward Said and Maria Todorova, this article is one of the very few post-structuralist accounts on EU-Western Balkans relations in general.

What follows is first an overview of the EU's narratives on the Western Balkans as the Euro-crisis unfolded, and second, the way narratives in the Western Balkans on the EU have changed throughout and after the waves of protests.

The EU in Crisis. What Is in a Name?

The Eurozone crisis (Euro-crisis) which started in 2009 due to weak economic growth and forecasts, large debts and competitive weakness, affected the economies of the member states. Several countries in the zone could not repay their debts without the assistance of the European Central Bank and/or the International Monetary Fund. The consequences of the crisis have become all the more prominent, both in the everyday lives of European citizens and in the official political agendas of their local and international institutional representatives (*ibid.*). The crisis has had its impact in other dimensions, both within the EU and in regard to its relations with non-EU. De Ville and Orbie explain that “while in the first months following the full-scale explosion of the mortgage-cum-financial crisis in the United States, many European prominent figures were self-assuredly touting the superiority of the European model of social, regulated and bank-based capitalism; since the outbreak of the Greek crisis, this self-confidence has quickly melted away” (*ibid.*). Drawing on the work of De Sousa Santos on a de-colonial undertaking, Stamenković explains the current political rationality that is stretching out to the so-called Euro-crisis. For him, this does not only apply to the context of so-called mental health crisis in Europe, nor does it apply to the so-called economic crisis, behind which hides the actual crisis of authority of the global neoliberal capitalist regime. Instead, “this task applies to the context of another, epistemic crisis (or the crisis of knowledge, its production and re-production) which is inseparable from the neoliberal project of today” (Stamenković, 2013).

Either as a supranational entity or as an equivalent of ‘Europe’, the EU has been (self)defined in opposition to others throughout time. Situated in the ‘West’, its others have traditionally been the East, the South, the Orient, and the Balkans. ‘The East’ and ‘the South’ appear to be more temporal ‘others’ that have in time shifted in the ‘West’. Concretely, this was the case with Central and Eastern European countries prior to the fall of communism. Current narratives in Brussels (mainly from EU officials) make obvious reference to the Czech Republic as being unequivocally European – non-other. Goddereris (2013) reminds us that while throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s the discourse of ‘East Europe’ was fairly present, towards the end of the 2000s, it was the ‘South’/‘North’ division that gained prominence, fading away the ‘East’/‘West’ dichotomy. The ‘otherness’ of the South (Greece, Spain) was historically constructed through their legacy with authoritarianism. The South as ‘other’ faded away with Spain and Greece appearing unequivocally ‘EU’ and ‘Western’ up until the financial crisis, when the otherness of the ‘South’ was underlined again. Categories like ‘West’, ‘North’ and ‘South’ in these narratives are not simple geographical notions. Their existence is based on their definition against its others. Derrida called them binary opposites. According

to him, Western metaphysics is based on the binary opposites of good vs. bad, rationality vs. spirituality, nature vs. culture, etc. These binary opposites do not have a peaceful co-existence; in fact, they are violent hierarchies (*ibid.*).

The violent hierarchies reintroduce ‘South’ as a problematic category towards the ‘North’. In this sense the ‘North’ refers to the ‘hard-working’, ‘disciplined’ Dutch, Germans, Swedes etc., whereas the ‘South’ refers to the ‘easy-going’ ‘(slightly) lazy’ Greeks, Portuguese, etc. In a similar way, Ntampoudi argues that precisely these hierarchies in turn – albeit in their in-totality, temporality and in-terruptibility – create and (re)introduce narratives of the EU’s ‘others’. She argues that the media and elite rhetoric has constructed both German and Greek citizens as prototypical representatives of Core Europe and Periphery of Europe (Ntampoudi, 2013b). Anchored around the economic acronym PIGS, which stands for Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain, these narratives are built on the premises that the origins of the Eurozone crisis are to be found in the fiscal profligacy of PIGS countries which are accustomed to live beyond their means and work less than other Europeans.

The ‘Balkans’ Returns

The same ‘return’ is also witnessed with regard to the ‘Balkans’. Spectres of the ‘Balkans’ and ‘Balkanization’ are apparent both in relation to the Euro-crisis and the wave of protests in BH and Kosovo. The term ‘spectres’ is taken from Derrida’s account ‘Spectres of Marx’. Alike in his account, ‘Spectres of Balkanization’ is used to denote the unstable narratives in the Balkans; narratives that are not here, not present, but existing; that are absent and present at the same time; legitimate and illegitimate at the same time (Derrida, 2006).

Greece was the first country of the Balkan Peninsula to join the EU. This way, Greece had ceased being ‘Balkan’ and became ‘European’ instead. De Ville and Orbie explain that while initially the discourse was pointing to the crisis in Europe with the labels of financial and economic crisis, after the Greek bailout the discourse shifted and everyone was talking about the ‘euro’ or ‘sovereign’ debt: “This is not a trivial change of wording: thereby the blame was shifted from the market to the state” (2014), making Greece the focal point of the crisis. Along with this, Greece was therefore shifted back in the ‘Balkan’ club, through which a lot of the characteristics of the ‘South’ were substantiated with Greece’s other identity layer – the Balkans. This in turn re-introduced a discourse that would attribute the root of the crisis to aspects of ‘Balkanization’².

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines ‘Balkanization’ as a division of multinational state into smaller ethnically homogenous entities. The term was initially

² The term will be elaborated in the following section.

coined at the end of World War I to describe the ethnic and political fragmentation that followed the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, particularly in the Balkans (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2000). Todorova (2009) argues that what has been emphasized about the Balkans is that its inhabitants do not care to conform to the standards of behaviour devised as normative by and for the civilized world. To this day, 'Balkanization' has come to be associated with a number of 'dysfunctions' and 'diseases' in several fields, including computer science (Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson, 2005), medicine (Schmidt et al., 2008), history (Patterson, 1995), demography studies (Ellis and Wright, 1998), etc.

Observing the developments from Belgium and from contacts with EU officials in Brussels, it became evident that as the Euro-crisis was unfolding, more narratives referring to characteristics of the 'easy South' and/or (slightly) 'chaotic Balkans' became prominent. The 'Balkanization' of Greece implicitly put the Western Balkans on the map of crisis too, where again the 'Balkans' appears as a monolith that is unreliable and unpredictable. For many scholars, the Greek crisis has created another – non-quantifiable, but very potent – discrediting of the Balkans, and has fuelled criticism to propagate the perception of the entire Balkan region as an unreliable area of corruption and instability (Panagiotou, 2013).

The Protests and the De-mythicization of 'Europe'

The 2014 protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina marked the first time since the end of the war in BH that people from the three ethnic groups protested for a common concern, outside of the ethnic matrix. The slogan 'We are hungry in three languages!' (Gladni smo na tri jezika!) is an indication of an awakening of citizen rights, not merely minority or ethnic rights among the protesters. For Asim Mujkić, professor at the University of Sarajevo, the Bosnians "have shown that they are maturing as democratic citizens, that they are becoming subjects of change and are no longer the simple objects of the sadism directed at them by the party oligarchies" (Mujkić, 2014). In his edited volume, *Unbribeable Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Fight for the Commons*, Arsenijević affirms this benchmark and links the insistence on equality with the concept of 'unbribeability' – as an individual and collective refusal to be bribed and coerced into submission and servility.

Initially, the international response towards the protests in BH was confusing on the political level and orientalist at a more general, media level. The EU foreign ministers were repeating the phrase that citizens should have the right to protest, but that they should remain peaceful. With regard to the international media, the orientalist discourse returned. Bieber (2013) explains the tendency of various international media (*Newsweek*) of evoking violence and war as a typical part of the exotic Balkans. More than orientalist, he calls the reporting 'ignorant', in that it

failed to grasp the non-ethnic character of the events. It appears that every time a crisis or unrest surfaces in the Balkans, the international media reintroduce the list of stereotypes on 'Balkanization' through which the region is portrayed as something intrinsically corrupt, ungovernable and beyond repair. For instance, during the March riots of 2004 in Kosovo between Serbs and Albanians, which led to over 20 casualties and the burning of several Serbian orthodox churches, the international media seemed to be recycling the discourse and the tone of the 1990s in reporting. The cover page of *The Independent* of March, 19, 2004 stated "Burning churches, ruined homes and ethnic hatred. Are the Balkans set to explode again?" (Xharra and Tanner, 2004). Even though the nature of 'riots' of 2014 is not comparable to those of 2004 or the 1990s for that matter, the discourse does not seem to have changed much.

At the same time, scholars of EU Studies and EU enlargement were voicing the possibility for the insemination of anti-EU sentiment in the region (Panaritis, 2014). Yet, rather than anti-EU sentiment, what the protests brought was a de-mythification of the EU. During my field work in Kosovo (2013) and also with the sentiment gathered from the 'blogosphere' in the Western Balkans, what seems to have resulted both from the Euro-crisis and the wave of protests alike, is the toning down of enthusiasm for the EU.

Since the end of the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, both in Kosovo and maybe to a lesser extent in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the EU has been seen as the main catalyst and actor to stabilize the region. Most countries in the Western Balkans have shown a pro-EU stance, albeit to varying degrees. Around 76.5% of the total population of Bosnia and Herzegovina supports the EU accession. This percentage is higher in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (79%) than in Republika Srpska (67%) (Valić Nedeljković and Kleut, 2013). Traditionally, the main reasons for this support were based on the possibility for better employment, guarantee of permanent peace, political stability and freedom of movement (*ibid.*). Kosovo, with one of the highest percentages of support for EU integration in the region with 87% (Wohlert, 2012), also sees EU integration positively with regard to better economic and employment opportunities and overall socio-political stability.

Yet, 20 years after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and 16 years after Kosovo, the EU has remained a 'virtual promise'. Even with its missions deployed in both countries, this 'virtual promise' did not translate into social and economic wellbeing, nor did it tackle high-level corruption, improve the system of education, or further the prospects for development. In the meantime, local politicians remained focused on macro-politics, predominantly inter-ethnic (BH) and sovereignty matters (Kosovo), while remaining detached from the problems and challenges of everyday life. Unlike in the past, where the blame would fall (mostly) on local

politicians, the protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina and to a lesser extent in Kosovo too, maintained that both local and international actors present in the two countries were equally to blame. For Arsenijević, “local and international politicians, who in concert have maintained and allowed the parasitization of the unwieldy and nepotistic ethnic bureaucratic structures, have exhausted the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina for almost twenty-two years” (2014).

Conclusion

Although it is difficult and to some extent implausible to see a direct connection between the Euro-crisis and anti-corruption protests in BH and Kosovo, a series of events that are connected with the problems of economic crisis in the neoliberal world did have a role in the timing and the messages of the protests. First of all, since the beginning of the ‘Occupy Movements’ in the United States, there has been transnational sympathy in other movements and protests in different parts of the world. Second, the outbreak of the Euro-crisis in Europe led to an increase of anti-austerity protests in Greece and Spain, a trend that spilled over in Turkey and Bulgaria, among others. In making a connection between protests in Sarajevo and the Taksim Gezi Park events in Turkey, Bieber argues that protesters “are young, urban, feel excluded from politics and government, and see no other way to change the status-quo than by protest” (2013).

In the case of BH and to a lesser extent Kosovo, the de-mythicization of the EU has started from within, given the overall dissatisfaction with the international and EU structural presence deployed in both countries. Whereas the protests in Kosovo showed that the protesters had lost patience with the current governmental structures, citizens of BH clearly had lost their patience with the international structures, local political elite, the Office of High Representative (OHR), and their overall inability to solve systemic governmental deadlocks hampering daily lives of ordinary citizens.

The de-mythicization of the EU indicates that, like any other concept, EU integration is an empty term. Unless it is fleshed out with actual deliverables, it remains a mirage. The protests in BH and to a lesser extent in Kosovo, the Euro-crisis and its effects have played an enhanced role in first elucidating the structural and deep-seated systemic problems that are definitely to be dealt with domestically. Kurtović explains that for a while “internationals looked on in disbelief as their efforts to wave the carrot of EU accession fell flat, unable to garnish any meaningful attention – let alone mobilizing power – among the Bosnian public” (2014). She holds to the argument that the protests have shown that citizens of BH understood that “the International Community is a self-serving, self-interested and alienated centre of power that has never been working in support of citizens’ interests” (*ibid.*).

Finally, it should be noted that the fall of enthusiasm for the EU in the Western Balkans, in addition to the Euro-crisis, is also a result of the enhanced enlargement requirements. The additional conditions to be fulfilled upon enlargement, the EU's discourse that points to a halt in enlargement, following an increase in immigration numbers from the region upon visa liberalization, have altogether 'de-mythicized' the EU and the so-called 'European future'.

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