
Communicative Dimensions of Centre-Periphery Relationships: Communicating the Post-1989 Traumatic Conjuncture in the Balkans and the Future of Europe

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Summary

This paper surveys the post-1989 Europe/Balkan conjuncture from the perspective of communication studies. I employ David Morley's materialist definition of communication, encompassing exchange/movement of information/ideas, goods, and people. Observing the exchange of ideas, we find EU's Euro-scepticism contrasting the Balkans' Europhilia. Considering the movement of people, the brain-drain from the Balkans is paralleled by incoming migrations and a questioning of whether leaving the region is necessarily advantageous. The movement of goods, finally, elucidates the ascendancy of Chinese investment in the region, confronting Europe with being seen as a periphery of Asia. The materialist communication approach thus reveals unanticipated dynamism (a working-through of inherited inequality), rather than one-way perpetuation of old centre-periphery prejudice. Though historically modelled as Europe's traumatized inner Other where nationalism was imposed, the Balkans still have much to narrate about impurity of identities and uncertainty as Europe's new/old possible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Communication, Identity, Balkans, Europe, Periphery

Introduction

Narratives about Europe's alleged decline in global spheres of influence and its internal crises have come to dominate debates about the continent's current orientations and proximate futures. Europe becomes possibly unique globally by way of being represented through such ominous hypotheses as "death of Europe" or commemorative accounts like "history of Europe", thus making the continent's traumas and their contested memory a lasting communicative resource. Such types of con-

sideration leave less known the capacity of centre-periphery, one other important Europe's brainchild, to show things differently. I would argue that taking periphery, whether social, cultural or geographical, seriously, as is familiar in media studies, can help us better understand what goes on in the centre (e.g., asking *whose* "death" is at stake?) and hopefully challenge monolithic (centre-centric) views. If communication co-constructs geographical regions such as peripheries through simultaneous practices of informational *and* corporeal *and* material mobility, rather than just one-way representation (Morley, 2017), adopting this strategic methodological syntheticism can be particularly helpful in communicating Europe's current developments and possible futures.

I focus on Europe's usually overlooked communicative relationships with the Balkans, which exist predominantly as a notional periphery that parallels the more technical and allegedly politically correct appellation, Southeast Europe (Europe's term reflecting EU-enlargement and "securitisation" of the region after 1998-1999 Kosovo wars; Mishkova, 2019, p. 212). I observe how the Balkans, traditionally stereotyped as backward and geographically referring to the south-eastern European peninsula that stretches from Slovenia to Greece and Bulgaria where the Balkan mountain range is located, also evolve as a significant communicative space. I show that, observed communicatively with its assumed "centre" ("Western Europe"), the Balkans can help define Europe beyond narratives about its global decline. The inclusion of the Balkans in the equation can usefully de-centre (or "provincialize", to quote Chakrabarty, 2000) the European self-image of centrality and harvest ideas for its possibly more inclusive alternatives.

Previously, I argued that "rather than historicity", to draw from Chakrabarty, where the Balkans are positioned as the past and Western Europe as the future, "we need an understanding of Europe and the Balkans as co-constitutive of each other" (Krajina, 2016, p. 5). Here I want to develop this argument (see also Mishkova, 2019, p. 3; Ballinger, 2017a; Jović, 2018) by observing the implied relationship as *centre-periphery communication*. By doing so, I advocate acknowledging "multiple competing conceptualisations" and the vitality of "the subjectivity and the agency of the Balkans" (Mishkova, 2019, pp. 4, 5). While keeping hierarchical (power) relations in view, I seek to provoke a consideration of whether "Europe can find a home in the Balkans" (Drakulić *et al.*, 2016), rather than solely vice-versa. This converse practice might help us understand the specificity of the Balkans in that they have historically learned to appreciate *uncertainty as condition* and *unforeseen consequences as possibility* (see also Krajina, 2021). So conceived, the Balkan periphery is engaged in a two-way, though always unequal, exchange with Europe, one that can be transformative for both. As such, this relationship is more about what LaCapra (2016), drawing on Freud, called "working-through" unre-

solved, particularly traumatic issues, as will be indicated below on the devastating import of nationalism in the multi-ethnic Balkans. The communicative dynamism of Europe-Balkans relationship suggests fluctuation, even though the implied power relations between the two actors remain largely unchanged: the Balkans continue to be Othered by Europe as inferior in diverse ways. As opposed to “acting-out”, a compulsive repetition of previous ruptures, such as blames for wars and crises (LaCapra, 1998), the observed relationship reminds us of the continuing relevance of ambiguous belonging as a possibility for Europe’s future.

This kind of argument has not been widely exercised in debates on Europe but is familiar in communication, cultural studies, and anthropology. bell hooks’ perspective about “counter-hegemonic” values of “the margin” sees marginality as something that can be “chosen” and not necessarily only given as destiny or coercion; it can be “a space of radical openness” (1989, pp. 15, 23). Another, more empirically formulated example can be found in critical ethnographies of African cities which find “the power of the unforeseen and of the unfolding... [and] people’s relentless determination to negotiate conditions of turbulence to introduce order and predictability into their lives” (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004, p. 349). Above all, I draw from Stuart Hall’s key approach in cultural studies that conceptualizes communication as hegemonic but also circular and non-deterministic, whereby peripheral actors can challenge inherited orders (see Morley and Chen, 1996). This view can help us valorise the subaltern voice as one which narrates not only itself but also the centre to which it speaks, and which had constituted it as peripheral.

Post-1989 Europe faces conflicting developments such as the rise of populism, migration crisis and the weakening of the welfare state (cf. Krastev, 2017, pp. 1-15) with the return of bloc politics through the 2022 war in Ukraine. As a result, there is a profound sense of uncertainty underlying debates about the future of Europe’s self-image as the centre of the modern human world (Förnas, 2012). Thus, I begin by unpacking the argument that Europe has from the start been constructed through communication (Morley, 2017, p. 21). I emphasize that Europe has little meaning outside peripheral positions (cf. Morin, 1989, p. 26). I go on by examining in detail and with a variety of empirical cases the communicative exchanges between “the Balkan periphery” and “Europe”, hence foregrounding a “non-media-centric” or “materialist” approach to communication in all three key forms systematised by Morley (2017). These involve: *the mobility of ideas and information* (tracing the Balkans in everyday media representation of Europe’s east vs. west and their views of each other), *people* (as migration from the Balkan periphery in escape from corruption and provincialism and toward this periphery as a retreat from hyper-competitiveness and migrant subjectivity), and *goods* (observing the Balkans as a contact-zone between Europe and Asia). Morley (*ibid.*, p. 26) recently

rehabilitated this triple articulation of communication to counterbalance the unhelpful tendency in contemporary media/communication studies to over-emphasise “symbolic, institutional, and technological dimensions” of media, which, for him, constitute an important but by far insufficient, and often a lesser, aspect of developments at stake. By contrast, the current “media-centric” perspective, while rightly taking media as its principal scholarly concern, misrepresents media as also having a central and determining role in social phenomena like protest (dubbed monolithically “Facebook revolution”), urban infrastructure (reduced to one-dimensional “smart city”), or social change (hypothesised as single-issue “digital age”) and so on. Speaking from within media studies, Morley advances a “non-media-centric” view, which, save for the terminological contradiction, has immense analytical value in its insisting on “situating (media/communication) in their broader social and economic, political and cultural contexts”, as was the principal agenda of the field in its early, experimental stage (*ibid.*; see also Krajina *et al.*, 2014). Thus, revolutions are centrally about face-to-face contact in key city spaces, digital urban technologies entirely depend on physical infrastructures, and digital age is anything but spaceless, ahistorical, or disembodied (*ibid.*). My analysis connects issues of space, representation, and power to show that Europe is constructed through hegemonic struggle that shapes communication among its centres and peripheries beyond mere symbolic interaction or representation.

Europe as Communicative

Europe is a continent that entirely emerges from communication. The constitutive relevance of communication in assessing social realities is particularly explicit in Europe, a continent thoroughly shaped by debating its self-image, inner stereotyping, and intra- and trans-continental migration, warring, and trade. To name just the most obvious examples, Europe’s communicative heritage draws from the continent’s both outward orientation and introspection as its defining characteristics (Bauman, 2004). Europe’s mobile self-perception goes back to an ancient Greek myth about the endless search for the same-named princess. Europe’s definition forever remained in the plural, drawing not only from the fact that “none” of its national borders followed closely the geographical borders (Morin, 1989, p. 45) but also from the changing and diverse coexisting borders of its inner “spaces of identity” that revolve around the question of who can belong in Europe (Morley and Robins, 1995). Europe’s dedication to constructing and destructing a great many inner and outer borders (e.g. EU membership, Eurozone, Schengen space, Eurovision, mobile phone roaming charges, transport corridors, gas pipelines, etc.) establishes borders as the vital organ of sociality and communication (Morley, 2000). The continent seems as though “it drew borders solely to target its intractable urge to trespass” (Bauman, 2004, p. 7).

Europe as communicative is further constructed as a series of reductions (Europe as West), negatives (Europe as not-East), tensions (Europhiles vs. Eurosceptics) and spatial/cultural hierarchies, whereby “geographical distance has been equated with cultural difference” (Morley, 2017, p. 59) and “diversity” with “division and contradiction” (Morin, 1989, p. 16). On a global scale, never “discovered” or conquered by another (Bauman, 2004, p. 9), Europe has been home to “both the best and the worst” of modern humanity, not only the industrial revolution and rationality, but also totalitarianism and weapons of mass destruction (Morin, 1989, p. 96). It has subordinated large parts of it along the way, to the point at which former colonies sought emancipation by recourse to the very concepts invented by Europe: citizenship, and the nation-state (*ibid.*; see also Passerini, 2000, pp. 55-56; Žmegač, 2014, p. 73; Chakrabarty, 2000, pp. 4, 6). The territory of the EU, the continent’s supreme political association, keeps changing (bureaucratic slowness in admitting Balkan countries post-1989, strategic speed in inviting Caspian countries in 2022, partition of Great Britain). Thus, Europe can never assume territorial completeness such as that of the United States (Kurelić, 2015a). Europe is indeed narrativized as “always” “unfinished” and “in some kind of crisis” (Fornäs, 2017, p. 5).

If, despite all said, Europe considers “itself ‘civilization’” (Bauman, 2004, p. 7) and indeed the measure of modernity (Morley, 2006, p. 165), this image of *centrality* has entirely been drawn from the continent’s *peripheries*. As Morin (1989, pp. 25-26) explicates, ancient Greek and Latin cultures come from the periphery of the continent (at that point referring as Europe only to the present-day Nordic periphery), while Christianity, as the oft proclaimed cornerstone of EU’s identity, arrives from Asia Minor; Islam, Europe’s longstanding elected negative, comes from the Mediterranean basin. Internally disputing, Europe’s centres have kept shifting (in the late 14th century it is Venice, in early 16th century comes Antwerp, by the end of the century Genova takes over, in early 17th follows Amsterdam and in late 18th/early 19th century London (*ibid.*, 36), and Paris as “capital of modernity”), until in the 20th century the centre moves overseas to New York and in the 21st century to Asian cities. It was through geographically hierarchized agony and competition among peripheries and centres that customs, techniques, knowledge, and goods in Europe were being exchanged (*ibid.*). The fault lines of east/west, north/south, were drawn against and alongside those of religious vs. state rule and monarchy vs. the nation, thus making Europe into “unitas multiplex” or “complexus”: “a unity of order, disorder and organization” (*ibid.*, pp. 33, 20). As Rokkan suggests, the whole history of relations in Europe can be summed up as a “center formation at the periphery of the network of strong and independent states” (1999, p. 160, cited in Parker, 2008, p. 20). In the meantime, Brexit might be giving way to a potential new semi-European periphery, a mega-region referring to “Europe outside the EU”,

a ring of non-EU states stretching from the UK to Ukraine, parts of the non-EU Balkans and Turkey (Jović, 2018). They together might provide a different negative or reference point for the future EU identity, this time involving as periphery part of the “West”, the UK (*ibid.*, p. 361).

Periphery as Relational, the Balkans as a Signifier

It is nothing new to identify Southeastern Europe (SEE) as periphery within Europe (geopolitics sometimes referred to it also as “superperiphery” to signify susceptibility to economic crisis during the 2008 turmoil; Ballinger, 2017b, p. 60). This technicist appellation is now commonplace in political sciences. But to observe this periphery as the symbolic notion of the Balkans does something important to our understanding of the European whole: it brings back, in a communicative and historical sense, narratives of mutual dependence and dynamic exchange between the implied centre and periphery. Although there are many coexisting centres/peripheries in Europe, for no other region in Europe has peripheral location meant such a consistently inferior value. It is thus no surprise that much like the inexhaustive debates about where Europe ends, there are the debates about where the Balkans begin (see Bakić-Hayden, 1995 on “gradation of orient”¹).

As I argued previously, the Balkans have tended to assume a communicative/representational role for Europe in two overlapping ways (Krajina, 2016). *First*, the Balkans have been constructed and sought to be kept unchanging as a representational “screen” onto which Europe projects its “fears and desires” concerning its post-1989 others, after the end of the Cold War weakened the importance of the Soviet other (Morley and Robins, 1995; Krajina, 2016). As described famously by Todorova (1997), this screen is a Balkanist politics of representation, Balkanism (similar to Orientalism). This communicative practice familiar across the media, portrays the region as: a) primitive (even if attractively so in contexts of tourism), b) transitional (“European Turkey”; cf. Mishkova, 2019, p. 7), and c) violent genuinely, rather than circumstantially (as is usually said for Western European violence of imperialism or the Holocaust; Mazower, 2000, p. 148), following the traumatic import of Western Europe’s unifying meta-narrative, nationalism, and big powers’ promises of self-determination made to peasants within this space of ethnic “mosaics” (Todorova, 1997). As Jović reminds us, Germany and Italy used nationalism to unite; former Yugoslav countries used nationalism to divide peoples, skyrocketing unnecessary suffering, border patrolling, and mythologizing (2014). The Balkans

¹ Similar inter-European classifications take endless other forms like “Euro-Orientalism”, which assumes as Oriental (dishevelled) segments of its own, Western European, population, usually the working-class (Adamovsky, 2006), while “gradation of Europeaness” (Kuus, 2004) sees Western European capitals appear more “urban” than those in the Balkans (see Obad, 2016).

were made into a border in a double sense, both “spatial” (on the European map) and “temporal” (in relation to postponed “modernization”; Močnik, 2002, p. 96). Resulting contrasts were to be resolved in the EU: as opposed to antagonism characterising “the Balkans”, cooperation was to be found in “Europe” (*ibid.*, p. 84), with EU-membership candidates assuming discursive “position[s] of ‘pupil[s]’” (Raik, 2004, pp. 582-583). As Balibar famously argued, Europe might do well by “recogniz[ing] in the Balkan situation not a monstrosity grafted to its breast, a pathological ‘aftereffect’ of underdevelopment or of communism, but rather an image and effect of its own history” that needs to be “confront(ed)” (2004, p. 6).

Second, the Balkans are ordinarily assigned a back seat in Europe’s arena, enjoying quasi-permanent invisibility and irrelevance until brief but traumatic moments occurred when the West-centric conception of order came into danger and the Balkans’ presence flashed before Europe’s troubled eyes. These events took place in the Balkans, including the 1683 Battle of Vienna as a point of closest territorial contact between Islam and Christian Europe, the start of the Great War in Sarajevo, the biggest European antifascist movement ascending from former Yugoslavia, Eurozone’s 2008 financial crises epitomized in Greece’s debt and then more recently the migration crisis and Germany’s 2016 Open Door policy that instituted the “Balkan route”, and debates about the future of the EU enlargement (in the remaining non-EU states, the so-called “Western” Balkans). The last element emerges amid fears about the potential escalation of the 2022 war in Ukraine precisely along the never-relaxed orthodox-Muslim frontiers in Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The image of the Balkans as *antemurale christianitatis* returns during the 2022 invasion of Ukraine given that “all Balkan nations at one time or other have served as pet nations for the great European powers”, providing “sacrifice” in defending Europe on the Eastern frontier (Todorova, 1997, pp. 82, 59). At all these occasions the Balkans come to serve Europe as a symptom of its own insecurity, but the region itself remains excluded from this conversation.

The notion periphery comes *inter alia* from the classic Greek concept of *peripheres*, where it doesn’t only mean “remote” but also a “boundary” which “revolves” around something else (etymology.com, 2022). Thus, at each vantage point on Earth we will have something in peripheral vision. In fact, according to Fernandez (2000, p. 118, cited in Parker, 2008, p. 3), given that “all wisdom” is “perspectival”, it follows that, “like vision”, it is all, particularly “the most percipient and sensitive” wisdom, indeed “peripheral”. And while centres are characteristically capable “to organize space around them”, the periphery (“the margin”) is “where the center’s ordering capacity begins to ebb” (Parker, 2008, p. 8). Given that “the exercise of power is... a sufficient condition of centrality, but not its essential character” and that “margins are not only... constructed by centers, but also constructive in the

overall center-and-margin order” (*ibid.*, pp. 8, 10), the Balkans can crystallize for scrutiny deeper orientations of and possibilities for Europe. Unburdened with bearing the weight of the centre, the periphery can narrate possibilities for the whole, which emerges exactly from the existing centre-periphery relationship.

The Centre-Periphery Conjunctionure in Post-1989 Europe: Communication as Triple

Describing possibly the most potent and least defined concepts in cultural studies, Hall explained his idea of conjunctionure as “a period when different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions... come together, producing a crisis of some kind” (Hall and Massey, 2012, p. 55). Conjunctional analysis assumes both that “the nature of the crisis could not be reduced to a single cause” and that there are always “possible lines of emergence” or “new ‘settlements’” (Clarke, 2014, p. 115). If, for Hall, the defining post-war moment was 1956, showing limits of both imperial and communist rules in the Suez and Hungary, our defining conjunctionure is 1989, dubbed by Ash “post-wall” period (2017). The historical expansion of the EU in Central and Southeastern Europe gave way to a parallel tendency that Habermas recognised as “repeated clashes” between the extension of “market economy and democracy” (2016). I would argue that these “clashes” get *articulated*, or linked, to draw from Hall, through the problem of *belonging in Europe*, that is, its discursive equivalent, the EU. Its crisis is about the weakening of the global centrality of the West as the epitome of Europe, without indication as to when, and at which costs and with which possibilities for whom, the crisis will resolve, thus prolonging the trauma of social change (Sztompka, 2004). This is particularly so in the light of the unfolding war in Ukraine: if the Balkans re-emerged as Europe’s negative during the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, is the Soviet Other now returning and taking the place of the Balkan Other? Cold-war fears have returned but the Balkans as a negative have not disappeared.

On the political front, after Slovenia was allowed to join the EU in 2004, Bulgaria and Romania entered the EU in 2007 and Croatia in 2013. The region remained “balkanized” in the bad old sense: there are now Balkan countries whose EU-accession is very slow (Serbia and Montenegro), those still waiting for the negotiations to actually begin (North Macedonia and Albania), which for them means adopting more accumulated legal norms than ever before, even though these countries in certain key criteria already perform as well as the present EU members in the Balkans did at the time (Petrovic and Smith, 2013, p. 566). There are those only just recognised as an EU candidate, like Bosnia and Herzegovina, and still to be acknowledged even as a country, such as Kosovo. At the same time, the whole of the region is at the bottom of the EU economically and politically, in terms of

democratic consolidation, following the “Copenhagen criteria”, thus requiring the EU to continue its “disciplinary practices” such as Progress Reports (Stubbs and Lendvai, 2016, p. 34). As Kurelić suggests, however, the only actual transition to liberal democracy in Croatia was performed as long as it served the purpose of EU-integration, that is, fulfilling the EU criteria (2015b). At the same time, “while Europeanising the Balkans” by way of peace-meal accession, “the EU Balkanised itself”, with Brexit and certain “member states despis[ing] being member states” (Štikš, 2018).² But from the perspective of the centre/periphery communication, there is something more vital going on: the Balkans as one important site of Europe’s possible redefinition. I trace these tendencies by following Morley’s tripartite model (2017).

A) Mobility of Information/Ideas

According to the well-known argument elaborated above, the Balkans have been modelled as a bad European periphery through repetition of a narrow range of ideas like violence. The deep embeddedness of this image can hardly be overestimated and thus should be held in view, rather than taken for granted, during observations of the more contemporary ideas about the region. As Mazower reminds us, for modern observers, the Balkans have existed “always”, while, historically, until two centuries ago, there existed only the former Roman land “Rumelia” that the Ottomans took over from the Byzantines and the “antique Haemus”, the mountain range (2000, p. xxv). The Balkans were only “invented” later. Thus, the allegedly eternal existence (and eternal violence) of the Balkans forms a major part of its negative representation. The image remains unaffected even by the peace-meal Europeanisation of the region, which, according to Todorova (2015, p. 93), gives way to “the eradication of the final vestiges of a historical legacy of ethnic multiplicity and coexistence” (*ibid.*). In turn, the continuity of the negative stereotyping is matched with something equally consequential, the EU-accession of the region as the potential “end of the historical Balkans and the Ottoman heritage” (*ibid.*). The consequences of this parallel process can be observed by taking a closer look at what cultural difference has meant in the Balkans and the difference the Balkans can still make in Europe.

² A parallel can be drawn to what Blanuša identified as mirroring issues Yugoslavia was facing just before its dissolution, including: “democratic deficit” (e.g. Brexit), lack of common beliefs within the “supranational” polity (e.g. Euroscepticism), using wider geopolitical meta-narratives to foster integration (e.g. Cold War), accusing individual nations for shared economic issues (e.g. Greece), multi-speed growth within the transnational territory (e.g. SEE countries), lack of capacity to act collectively (e.g. war in Ukraine), and tensions between federalism and confederalism (e.g. failure of EU constitution) (2014, pp. 215-216).

As Mazower explains, while pre-EU Christian Europe expelled non-Christians, “non-Muslims were always the majority in the Ottoman-ruling Balkans” (2000, p. xxxi). Even though this rule removed Balkan peoples from European developments of modernisation through nation-building for centuries (*ibid.*, p. xl), this may have been a rare opportunity to see in practice EU’s much-professed motto “unity in diversity” (predated by the Yugoslav “brotherhood and unity”). The Balkans had been dominated by the Byzantine and Ottoman empires for almost the entire modern history, in a particular way that matched absolutism with conviviality, the specific inheritance of which is neglected in EU-membership negotiations.

People in the Ottoman Balkans were often so uninterested in exclusionary group identification that historical, if anecdotal, accounts still leave much to marvel at today. For example, an early 20th-century encounter between a Greek observer with peasants in Thessaloniki resulted in utter confusion for both sides. Responding to his question about which ethnicity (Greek or Bulgarian) the peasants identified with, they said they were “Christians” and begged for explanation as to what “Greek or Bulgarian” even meant (*ibid.*, p. 39). On another occasion, an English traveller, who in 1905 enquired about the ethnic origin of some young men around Ohrid in Montenegro, found that they nonchalantly attended both mosques and churches, because these were all equally “spiritual” modes of inhabiting the world and because believers were eligible to lower taxes (*ibid.*, p. 40). During the Ottoman rule in the Balkans, in the illiterate, agricultural and pre-national social organisation, it was, and in some places still is, perfectly normal to change one amulet with another, irrespective of the confession it belonged to if it was believed to work (*ibid.*, p. 56). Such forms of conviviality included jokes and myths that would probably fail contemporary tests of political correctness. There were also ethno-methods such as improvisation of local dialects, inter-ethnic fraternisation, even inventions of hybrid religions such as “Islamic mysticism, Bektashism” (*ibid.*, pp. 60-69). These symbolic/communicative practices made people feel safe living along contact points among Venetian, Habsburg, and Ottoman empires (*ibid.*).

Strategic, communicative conviviality can be read off from architecture too. In Sarajevo, as one of many examples, Yugoslav authorities built their representative buildings separately from, rather than in the place of, the old Ottoman bazaar (Baščaršija) that remained the centre of the city (Bădescu, 2019, p. 374). The Habsburgs did the same before, they only added new buildings to signify “the allegiance of Muslim elites” (*ibid.*, p. 369). The Habsburgs designed in terms of a “hybrid” or “pseudo-Moorish” style following their perception of what was eastern (e.g., building a “European” quarter, with the emblematic City Hall and the Central post office, to provide “a window of Austria to the Balkans” (Sparks, 2014 in *ibid.*, p. 368), which the local authorities in turn read as flattering presence of European ar-

chitecture (*ibid.*, p. 372)). Yugoslav cities abound in what Bădescu called “textured historicity” that emerges through the constellation of multiple, ambivalent pasts” (*ibid.*, p. 367).

In contemporary Balkans, this heritage of conviviality remains only in contradictory terms. In Croatia, the Muslim community (“Bosniak minority”) enjoys a model of integration praised in Europe, and the capital Zagreb opened in 2022 the first library of Roma literature in Europe. At the same time, coinciding with Croatia’s accession in the Schengen security area, new Muslim migrants arriving on the Balkan route have seen cases of Croatian police brutality at the border with Bosnia. This contrast between regional nation-building and EU integration processes, on the one hand, and capacity of local populations across generations to improvise conviviality from below, on the other, can be seen more explicitly in popular culture.

As Metykova demonstrates, in Bosnia and Herzegovina’s commercial media sector, in programmes featuring reality shows and *turbofolk* music, there is more positive identarian impurity, in terms of multi-ethnic participation from the region, that can ever be secured through heavily regulated and politically dependent representation of different groups in public service media (2016). Youtubers and their ex-Yugoslav audiences who publicly pride themselves in routinely surpassing (practically miniscule) linguistic differences and indiscriminately watching everything regional are a further case in point (DW, 2019a). Also growing in popularity are satirical social media sites where users from across former socialist (e.g. *Slavorum*) and Yugoslav republics (e.g. *Svaka ćas*) together jokingly embrace Balkanist stereotypes and transform them into distinctive reference points (see Mishkova’s concept of “Balkans as autospace” below). A common reference point can also be adopted from Western media as was the case with the 1980s BBC sitcom *Only Fools and Horses*, which in its portrayal of working-class brothers’ “shady business” in a London suburb, offered, according to regional viewers’ comments online, an allegory of tragicomic inadequacy of the region’s post-Yugoslav politicians and a metonym for the entire region’s continued failure to improve self-perceived lower-class position in Europe (see for example Index.hr, 2017). The fact that Western European media have reported something outstanding from the region itself becomes news in local media as a positive index of brief international visibility. The same can conversely become a point of ridicule when the geography of the Balkans gets misrepresented in Europe (with RAI in 2021 showing Yugoslavia instead of individual states, as one example) or when old Balkanist metaphors blatantly resurface in EU discourse (e.g. European Council president Tusk’s 2021 observations on the history of the region as a “Game of Thrones” – “only without dragons”).

As we have seen, media offers “simultaneous availability” of dominant ideas/cartography “in centre and periphery alike”, whereby these ideas can at least be

made blunt, if not also challenged (Morley, 2017, p. 134). Mishkova takes this argument further and excavates “strategies that were used at the Balkan margins to challenge their asymmetric conceptualization by devising subversive regional categories... and alternative modes of collective identification” (2019, p. 4). Ideas about the Balkans as desirable flourished particularly between two world wars. These initiatives used the term “Balkanism” as the opposite of the current synonym for fragmentation; in linguistics, for instance, Balkanism meant “communal multilingualism and contact-induced change” (*ibid.*, p. 43). There were then initiatives, such as that by the then former Greek prime minister Papanastasiou, for a Balkan Union, which “marked the heyday of Balkan collaboration”, and a conscious response to the already visible “Western” prejudice (*ibid.*, p. 72). In parallel, Belgrade and later Bucharest, launched respective Balkan institutes, and “a new science of balkanology” (including also variants like “Balkaners”, “Balkan pact”, etc.). Lastly, there were groups like Zenit, an avant-garde art collective from Zagreb, arguably “the most influential Yugoslav” initiative from the 1920s (*ibid.*, p. 92). They portrayed a “Yugo-Balkan... hero-human” (*ibid.*) whose aim was to achieve “harmony of individualism and collectivism” (*ibid.*, p. 87). Responding to what they had seen as ego-dominated Europe, they envisaged a reverse process of a “Balkanization” of Europe, which would “turn the margins into the centres of a new and healthier world” (*ibid.*, p. 92). Though in essence reactionary, these nationalist “autochtonist visions” were based on a sense of “self-reliance” and “solidarity” that resulted from “millennia-long mixture of races” and “coexistence” (*ibid.*, pp. 86, 81). As Mishkova warns us, those instances of “the Balkans as autospace”, portraying the Balkans as “an alternative centre” (*ibid.*, p. 98), was mostly a reactionary quest in defence from surrounding empires.

Within the Balkans, Europe now exists more as an ideal and EU-accession as an escape from being observed as Balkan (second tier) by the West. Yugoslavia’s self-chosen central position in the Nonaligned Movement was also a way to alleviate its peripherality in Europe, even though its media, as a matter of state policy concerned with modernisation (“Coca Cola socialism”), preferred media contents coming from the West (Peruško *et al.*, 2021, p. 109). Nonetheless the strategic “hollywoodisation of Yugoslavia” did not lead to a “happy end” (Vučetić, 2012, p. 412) and the region became forever “re-peripheralized” after the nationalist break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s (Peruško *et al.*, 2021, p. 148). And while many European military officials or politicians planned actions in the Balkans based on assumptions read in books without prior embodied experience (Todorova, 1997), this is also how the Balkans eventually “arrived” in the EU. The official EU-negotiation process may have been a one-way transfer of Western values (Raik, 2004), but local media representation of Europe was equally monolithic, reducing ideas of liberty to the right to shiny spaces of consumerism and leaving out related issues of responsi-

lity (e.g., fair elections and transparent competition as opposed to family clientelism or corruption) (Drakulić, 2021). Contemporary obsession with Western recognition can range from architectural interventions such as the imitation of European heroic urban spaces in Skopje, where a classic modernist Triumphal Arc was erected in 2014, to entire public discourse, which Velikonja (2005) termed *Eurosis*, a form of sanctioned Eurocentrism. Writing in the wake of Slovenia's 2004 EU-accession, he saw the foreclosing of debate about EU membership as unmatched before: "never during the one-party era of the uniformity of mind under Yugoslav totalitarianism did I see as many red communist stars as I saw yellow European stars in the spring of 2004, that is to say, under democracy" (*ibid.*, p. 7; see also Krajina, 2013 for a similar case in Croatia). As Shohat and Stam put it, "Europeans can be anti-Eurocentric, just as non-Europeans can be Eurocentric" (2014, p. 4). It seems that for Europeans in the Balkans, worse than being stereotyped as bad is to be invisible entirely or to not matter at all (see Drakulić *et al.*, 2016). In the end, as Drakulić concluded, "Europe was built by those of us living on the edges, because it is only from there that you would have the need to imagine something like 'Europe' to save you from your complexes, insecurities, and fears" (1999, p. 212). This is where, in the era of Euroscepticism, the EU can find in the Balkans signs of faith it might need to reinvent itself.

B) Mobility of People

The movement of people as the second key form of communication formed the Balkans but also paved the way to forming modern Europe. The arrival of Slavs to the peninsula up to the 7th century "would have tremendous significance" for the breakup of the Roman empire and the divide between Catholicism and Orthodoxy (Mazower, 2000, p. 42). Centuries later, migrations continue to shape the continent; during WWII Europe was the prime source of refugees and in the recent decades a major receiver of refugees from Africa and the Middle East. This time, Europe represents the arrival with images of hopelessness and predictably refers to the entry point as "the Balkan" (rather than southeast European) route. Furthermore, these people's identities are simplified into a single, religious dimension, whereby the West turns out having more right to complexity and diversity in identity formation (Drakulić, 2021). Moreover, "Islamic migrants" are scapegoated by internal Europe's disputes. Some ex-Soviet EU-member states used democracy as means of "exclusion rather than inclusion" (Krastev, 2017, p. 59) and erected wired walls against non-Christian migrants. Arguably, this is partly a compensation for the dire lack of autonomy during the pre-1989 era (*ibid.*, p. 48) and partly, given their parallel welcoming of Ukrainian refugees, the fences against "Islamic" migrants are a young democracy's flight from necessary difficulties of living with cultural difference. At the same time, Central and Eastern European migrant workers settling

in Western Europe face similar difficulties themselves as migrants facing fences of immaterial kinds that articulate what I'd term an ascending *gradation of whiteness*. This novel phenomenon surfaced in hate crimes against Eastern Europeans, the white Others, in the streets of UK cities just days after the 2016 Brexit referendum (Krajina, 2019). During the 2020-2021 coronavirus pandemic, to take another example, the closing of borders first in Austria, then in Slovenia and Croatia, went sequentially, reactivating the "nesting of orientalisms" (Bakić-Hayden, 1995).³ Othering the East as a source of the disease became explicit when Austrian Chancellor Kurz accused those who return to Austria from summer vacations spent in their countries of origin, such as Croatia, of bringing along the virus into his country, even though ethnic origin was never documented in infection tracking data. Croatian authorities assumed similarly for those in Bosnia and Serbia but the logic wasn't geographically specific; it only took the handy Balkanist form. Morin reminds us that Western Europe responded similarly to the 1986 Chernobyl disaster where "the cloud spread irrespective of the East/West divide or the national borders" (1989, p. 141). The chance to practice supranational European solidarity was missed as soon as each nation closed in, debating whose type of measure of pollution should be taken as norm (*ibid.*).

In line with Hall's argument about race as "language" which we use to "read" and "classify" others, a range of "floating signifiers" (1997) service the contemporary, aforementioned "gradation of whiteness". These can involve naming unwanted behaviour like corruption as "Balkan" (at the cost of stereotyping all that is good in the Balkans). English, on the other hand, becomes visible as a central means of legibility in Europe, especially when it turns out being done particularly badly as was the case in a 2008 Bulgarian singing competition reality show, whose contestant's performance of Whitney Houston's "I can't live" as "Ken Lee", where sound was mistaken for meaning, became viral (Čvoro, 2016).

Geographical competence is another signifier of this gradation of peripherality among whites in Europe. I recount one such quotidian encounter for illustration. The usual greeting among strangers usually contains the demand for clarifying one's ethnic origin: "Where are you from?" To the Westerner, who posed the question at home in the West to an arriving Easterner, the question might have been a positive attempt to establish a measure of cultural proximity. To the blue-eyed pale Easterner, the request might have seemed an uncomfortable moment of exposure. "Croatia", a response arrived in strong Slavic accent. "Oh, good for you. Near Russia, right?" The collocutor unintentionally erected a "mini-Berlin Wall" (Bauman, 1997, p. 57) immediately. "No. Near Italy. And you?" "France", the voice respon-

³ On Europe-wide "coronationalism", see Bouckaert *et al.* (2020).

ded self-confidently. “Splendid. That’s near Spain?” Silence that followed the experimental (analogical but converse) response disclosed what passes as “common sense”, that those who reside in the arguable centre are required less geographical competence of what lies beyond.

For Hall, the margin as a point of origin can have unplanned affordances for those arriving; “though they are struggling in one sense at the margins of modernity, they are at the leading edge of what is destined to become the truly ‘late-modern’ experience” in terms of heralding “cultures of hybridity” (2017, pp. 281-282). Indeed, the young members of former Yugoslav diasporas in Western European cities like Berlin and London recreate something like “United States of Europe” (Drakulić, 2021) as they congregate in bars after work, sharing their photos on social media that show a rejection of ethnic origin as qualifying criterion for friendship and a matter of crude divisions (Rtl, 2018). Thus, not only ideas but states (their forms of social organisation) can move; this time it is a mobile Yugoslav conviviality that jumped times and spaces, being re-enacted in 21st century Western Europe by those who were born only after the country’s dissolution. The same image is being retold by seasonal tourism workers from Serbia and Bosnia in Croatia. As a contrasting parallel, images of workers’ families leaving the Balkans from bus and train stations following EU-enlargement become commonplace in regional news and film. Disastrous depopulation to the advantage of the West, coming after devastating demographic losses to the 1990s wars, matches financial traffic in the opposite direction. The money sent back to families left behind is estimated to be one of the biggest investment channels in the Balkans; this is no less intense in Croatia, an EU-member since 2013, where the amount by now supersedes the income made from its prime source, tourism (*Novi list*, 2021). As opposed to mainly semi-skilled men who, during Yugoslavia, migrated for limited periods of time to earn money for the family (*Gastarbeiter*), now people tend to move as whole families and indefinitely (Jurić, 2017). For those migrating from Croatia (Galić, 2019) to countries like Germany and Ireland, moving has led to bigger satisfaction with the quality of life, which chiefly refers to fair pay (while many continue to visit their homeland for affordable health services). As many as 80% of interviewees, however, didn’t foreclose the possibility of return; for the majority, better salaries would suffice to bring them back (*ibid.*).

Moreover, the region is experiencing unprecedented incoming migration too, primarily from further east (above all Asian countries) whose workers can accept low-paid posts emptied by migrating locals. At the same time, specific work visas, promising maximum tax-exemptions for the investing, hyper-mobile young and affluent “digital nomads”, are also attracting more demanding, if less committed, settlers, thus requiring cities like Zagreb to further internationalise. A further

incoming group in the Balkan periphery are the more permanent settlers from the West left at the periphery in their own societies, such as the German pensioned poor who have been registered moving to countries like Bulgaria and wealthier Germans seeking homes in Greece ahead of winter and gas shortages. With the Balkans, Europe thus faces less a “one-way direction [of migration] from the periphery to the centre” and more an “oscillation between different spaces, neither of which constitutes a final or stable home” (Morley, 2017, p. 137). This development begs research into which codes of behaviour will become necessary to adopt for whom and which new solidarities will emerge in the process. With right-wing populism weakening the attractiveness of Western Europe to migrants from its south-eastern periphery, the issue may be not only about who the new Other will be for Europe but where “Western Europe” – the idealised arrival point – will be for the new migrating Others, if anywhere at all.

C) Mobility of Goods

Maintaining the relevance of content and rhetoric in observing communication, Morley emphasises nonetheless that “the routes constituted by both geographical and media landscapes structure our actions in the world” (*ibid.*, p. 28). While medieval Europe drew east-west distinctions as those between sea-trading (west) and land-oriented (east) powers and the sea has been its central space of communication (Morin, 1989, pp. 32-33), the main context for the mobility of goods in the Balkans have been the mountains (Mazower, 2000, p. 3). This element alone made it clear that “communication is often easier with lands outside the peninsula than between its component parts” (*ibid.*). Consequently, the construction of railways and canals such as those that underpinned the industrial revolution in Western Europe was postponed (*ibid.*, p. 6) and animal-based transport remained prevalent for centuries (*ibid.*). Geography also underpinned the development of agriculture that served trade within the empire and made cities into its inner bureaucratic and transport nodes. Obstruction to physical mobility had direct impact on mobility of information, “the Balkans were too mountainous, too vulnerable and fragmented to make for an easy religious or linguistic homogenization” (*ibid.*, p. 43). Shared was primarily the same administrative space of the Ottoman empire which could thus allow “religious autonomy” (*ibid.*, p. 50). Thus, until today urbanisation, which remains at lowest levels in the EU, “often meant the village being brought into the city” (*ibid.*, p. 136), known analogically in Western urban centres as “the return of the primary group”. In the Balkans this process entailed the transfer of customs revolving around “personalized interactions, gifts, and favors” that served to “lubricate dealings with state officialdom” (*ibid.*, pp. 135-136) and that, as heritage, now clash with EU’s demand for full transparency.

Despite “Europeanisation” (opening up and standardisation), integration with “Western” living standards has taken a life on its own. As Berend and Bugarić show, in the second decade of the 21st century, Central and Eastern European countries (CEE) were given as much as 14 times the amount of financial support that was once provided by the Marshall Plan but the political requirement for the effective mobilisation of this support, democratisation (as opposed to clientelism), remained a peripheral concern (2015, p. 775). In turn, on average, “the countries of the region fluctuated at around half of the per capita income level of the West for two centuries, up to the present” (*ibid.*, pp. 770-771). In Balkan countries income has fallen 1989-2008 from 40 to 30% of the EU-average (Ouardighi and Somun-Kapetanović, 2009, p. 223, cited in Kraft, 2015). It seems that becoming fitter for the neoliberal market doesn’t make one automatically safer from its multiscale inequalities, or that transparency has been internalised as value.

In the meantime, the Balkans have been home to attempts at commoning which speaks back to EU’s meta-narrative of market-competition that often eludes rigorous deliberation. In 2009, for 3 months students blocked 20 colleges across Croatia to prevent the announced introduction of tuition fees in higher education. They won. The peaceful, non-partisan, non-hierarchically organised (Štiks and Horvat, 2015) civic action became a recognisable form in the former Yugoslavia (itself exemplifying “alternative forms of statehood”; Mazower, 2000, p. 115) and was seen in dozens of protests for public access to a clean environment. Most standing out was the 2014 workers’ occupation of factories in Bosnia. This “radical” request for the revision of privatisation and politicians’ privileges resulted in violence, but also in authorities’ resignations and reorganisations in nearly a dozen towns (*ibid.*). The 2021 protests in Belgrade against excavations of lithium needed to produce batteries for electric vehicles on which Western Europe’s green agenda depends, disclosed the opposition of periphery to become polluted for higher (Western) goals. These kinds of action, to name a few, perform what Stubbs called “politics as interruption”. Though often “isolated and fragmented” (Kraft, 2015), they narrate the idea of “unity in diversity” as based on “active making and claiming of commons... against enclosures, appropriations and commodifications” and for “imagining more humane alternatives” (Stubbs and Lendvai, 2016, p. 45).

The ideological reconciliation between East and West, structured around the extension of market to the East, overall turned out to be a unity, which I’d describe rephrasing Hall’s familiar definition of modern Marxism: “without guarantees”. It was only in 2017 that the EU Commission confirmed a decades-old speculation that the goods of some brands have been of lesser quality (e.g., containing less fish in fish sticks or fewer nuts in Nutella, etc.) for SEE countries. The industry argued that people’s taste in the region was different and that products based on original recipes

would be too expensive for them (Drakulić, 2021). “Western” media represented the case as “food apartheid” and Eastern Europe as “European trash bin” (*ibid.*). Similar assumptions were found in journalistic discoveries that certain bad kinds of meat imported from SEE into Western Europe were misrepresented as high quality (*ibid.*). East/West boundaries thus also make trade into communication, as they inject cultural prejudice about customers from the other side of the divide, whether it be East or West.

Another boundary, between Europe and Asia, is being articulated in the Balkans. Unlike the EU’s nation-building, NATO’s military power, or Russia’s bloc-based antagonism, China’s so-called “soft power” seeks presence in Europe through initiatives such as the new silk road, i.e. “One Belt, One Road” / “Belt and Road” initiative. Launched in 2013, this \$575 billion-worth infrastructural investment seeks to establish new links between China and Europe and Africa (Worldbank, 2018). Historically characterised by poor transport infrastructure as indicated above, the Balkans have emerged in this context as China’s inroad in Europe through China’s approach, which is not merely comparatively more affordable and faster but geopolitically strategic as contrasted to EU’s bureaucratized (conservative) systems of tender-competition (Vuksanović, 2017). By now the Balkans are already home to more than half of Chinese investments in Europe (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2022). China has become the largest foreign investor in Serbia, a major owner of the Greek port Piraeus and a key contractor in building Croatian infrastructure, a status announced at the 2019 China-Europe summit in Dubrovnik with 16 SEE European states (DW, 2019b). While the non-EU remnants of the Balkans, positioned historically as Europe’s link with the East, are under-represented in the maps announcing the development of the “Trans European Transport Network” (TENtec), the Balkans are to assume the centre of China’s activities in Europe. In the Balkans, Europe becomes Asia’s coming periphery.

Conclusion

Neither dominating nor dominated, located in-between historically visible worlds of former colonisers and colonies, the Balkans have largely remained also a peripheral concern in both Europe’s modern/imperial meta-narratives and postmodern/subaltern counter-narratives. There is nonetheless some unlikely similarity to be found between the historical presence of Europe as coloniser in places like India and the command of EU-conditionality in the Balkans. In both cases we see a linear “not yet” or “waiting-room” discourse preventing the latter from being “recognized as full participants in political modernity” (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 9). Moreover, as I sought to show in this article that observed these relationships from the perspective of communication studies, Chakrabarty’s search of “provincializing Europe” as a

way of rethinking the “heritage” of Europe “from and for the margins” (*ibid.*, p. 16) can also help us understand deeper dynamics of communicative relationships between Europe and its inner periphery, the Balkans. The historical peripheralisation of the Balkans has come to serve less the symbolic continuation of Europe’s centrality and rather Europe’s own “de-centring”.

Articulated as communication, that is, mobility of information/ideas, persons, and goods (Morley, 2017), the Balkan periphery’s relationships with Europe (as West) invite us to imagine “different Europes” (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 16), whereby necessary practices of solidarity, improvisation, commoning, impurity of identities, and conviviality can be found in unfamiliar forms and unexpected places. As Appiah pointed out, “values aren’t a birth right... they are only ours if we care about them” (2016). They have historically emerged from conflicting visions and narrations. But rather than ignoring those problems, Morin endorses embracing “divisions” and “antagonisms” that have for him been one constant in Europe’s history and as such a source of its “cultural diversity”; any other common ground lies in a future that has not yet happened (1989, p. 132). Thus, in the post-1989 Balkan/Europe conjuncture that heralds a weakening belief in a unified, welfare-based Europe, it is becoming less important whether a region is periphery as a given, assumed, passive subjectivity. What increasingly matters is *how* one is periphery, that is, how one communicates, performs or enacts their peripheral position with, and beyond, and despite, their centre(s).

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