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Re-Inventing Eastern Europe or Re-Inventing Europe?

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Abstract:

The imagination of Eastern Europe from outside, i.e., from West Europe has created an entity that is projected onto certain geopolitical areas that are not necessarily contiguous. Contrary to this position, I address the intellectual and literary imagination of the European margins from within and conclude that the inhabitants of the imagined geopolitical entity of Eastern Europe, to which I also belong, are bound to have more differentiated, even though at times colliding perspectives. I compare essayistic, historical, and fictional works to do justice to the different perspectives in mapping the European continent and I also posit the questions of cultural and political belonging to the European continent in the context of spatial theory, as elaborated by Irit Rogoff and Edward Soja.

The mapping of the European margins from within results in two or three different regions, depending on the point of view and historical period of observation, whose borders between each other and to Europe have been constantly renegotiated: East-Central and Central Europe and the Balkans. East-Central and Central Europe are both cultural regions whose boundaries have been historically argued by historians like Jenő Szűcs and George Schöpflin as well as utopias that need to serve as models for a better Europe, as argued by intellectuals like Milan Kundera and Egon Schwarz.

The missing element in the cultural mapping of Europe is the culturally in subordinate region of the Balkans. I examine the Balkan region in regard to (Central) Europe and the concept of European identity and propose that cultural multi-belonging, historical disruption, and recurrence of conflicting identities are the ongoing processes which replace the concept of a common identity. I therefore consider the Balkans as Bhabha's paradigmatic liminal space within Europe that cannot be positioned in the European culturally universalist grid and evaluated from a singular normative stance, yet needs to be re-integrated into rather than rejected from Europe into an uncertain marginalized existence.

Key Words:

Central and East Central Europe; Balkans; Utopian Imagination; Cultural Un/belonging

The title of the Sixth Euroacademia International Conference, "Re-Inventing Eastern Europe," took me first by surprise and then made me reconsider my, as I would like to believe, differentiated perception of Europe. The CFP points to Larry Wolff's critique of the (Western) European intellectual thought of the Enlightenment that in the author's view created the notion of Eastern Europe,¹ similarly to Said's claim that the Orient was created by the European imagination in need of the Other.² Yet, it is still assumed that Eastern Europe is an entity, even if entirely imagined, projected onto certain geopolitical areas that are not necessarily contiguous.

In my presentation I will address the intellectual and literary imagination of the European margins from within. The inhabitants of the imagined geopolitical entity of Eastern Europe, to which I also belong, are bound to have more differentiated, even though at times colliding perspectives. I will compare essayistic, historical, and fictional works to do justice to the different perspectives in mapping the European continent. I will also posit the questions of cultural and political belonging to the European continent in the context of spatial theory, as elaborated by Irit Rogoff and Edward Soja.

Thirty-three years ago, in the last years of the Cold War, in his famous essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe," the Czech born author Milan Kundera defined the term Eastern Europe as an unnatural political affiliation of Central Europe to the Soviet orbit, imposed on the Central Europeans by the unfortunate decisions at the Yalta Conference held in the last stage of the Second World War. It is worth hearing the original description of "Eastern Europe:"

By virtue of its political system, Central Europe is the East; by virtue of its cultural history, it is the West. But since Europe is itself in the process of losing its own cultural identity, it perceives in Central Europe nothing but a political regime; put another way, it sees in Central Europe only Eastern Europe.³

This seminal text in the discussions on Central Europe provoked a wide range of responses, both in favor and against Kundera's persuasively argued assertions, best summarized in the volume *In Search of Central Europe*, published in the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall and meanwhile, unfortunately, out of print.

For Kundera, there is no dilemma that Central Europe belongs to the West, or rather to Western Europe. As such, it is opposed not only to the Soviet Union but also, or indeed primarily, to Russia, which he observes not "as just one more European power but as a singular civilization, an *other* civilization."⁴ He further claims that in the aftermath of the war, "three fundamental situations developed in Europe [...]: that of Western Europe, that of Eastern Europe, and, most complicated, that of the part of Europe situated geographically in the center – culturally in the West and geographically in the East" (33). Kundera's Central Europe consists of what he calls "small nations", including Poland – he defines small nations not in regard to territory or population, but rather in regard to their precarious geopolitics that threatens "their very existence [...] at any moment" in history.⁵ These countries share the same cultural legacy built over centuries within the borders of the former Habsburg Monarchy as well as a deep distrust of history. In Central Europe history is not written by the victors but by the conquerors, never by the Central Europeans themselves, who, although inseparable from the European cultural paradigm, always end up on the wrong side of history as victims and outsiders.⁶

Although never explicitly articulated, the epithet Eastern in Kundera's essay is attributed to Russia alone. Russia, with its "another (greater) dimension of suffering, another image of space (a space so immense that entire nations are swallowed up in it), another sense of time (slow and patient), another way of laughing, living, and dying,"⁷ is the opposite pole to the Central European "family of nations," sharing the dream of a strong, unifying state that would retain "the greatest variety within the smallest place" and longing to be a "condensed version of Europe itself, [...] a small-arch European Europe."⁸

The Hungarians Jenő Szücs and George Schöpflin give similar criteria for a differentiation between Western and Eastern Europe (Szücs) or between Europe and Russia (Schöpflin). Szücs focuses on the historical and political processes which shaped the three regions that, according to him, comprise Europe. In 800 C.E. Western Europe was identical with Carolingian Europe (the realm of Charlemagne). It was opposed to the eastern successor of the Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire, and to the Islamic Ottoman Empire, and after the Arab invasion of the Iberian Peninsula its purported center was moved further to the North. Western Europe usurped the name "Europe" after the death of Charlemagne in 814, thus ignoring the other pole of Europe—the Byzantine Empire.⁹

The schism between Eastern and Western Christianity in 1054 moved the border between Western and Eastern Christianity further to the East: it separated, roughly, the Polish from Russian lands, and reached into the Baltic region in the thirteenth century. These two regions were shaped by the competing influences of Rome and Constantinople. The political demarcation line was at the same time a cultural one. Western Europe was culturally shaped by the Romanesque and Gothic periods, the Renaissance and the Reformation, but also by the development of autonomous cities with corporative structure and liberties, among other things. These phenomena did not reach further than the Polish and Hungarian Kingdoms.¹⁰

According to Szücs, following a not entirely perfect, yet acceptable consensus, the region between the demarcation lines of the former Carolingian Europe and Eastern Europe, which culturally still belonged to the West, was given the name Ostmitteleuropa (East-Central Europe). Everything beyond this East-Central Europe was known as the East, a region that never took part in the medieval cultural development of Western Europe. In the sixteenth century, the Russian state was founded between the White, the Black, and the Caspian Seas, in the territory between Poland and the Ural. In time, Russia and Eastern Europe became one and the same.¹¹

At the end of the medieval period the Seljuk Turks conquered the Byzantine Empire and renamed its Asian region Anatolia and the Southeastern European parts Rumelia—referring to the lands inherited from the Roman Empire. Since the Ottoman conquests stopped in Hungary, Szücs assigns it the role of the new border region from which Central Europe had just been liberated. He also decides to leave Southeastern Europe, today also or better known as the Balkans, out of consideration because it was excluded from the European structures for a half a millennium.¹²

Schöpflin compares the Russian model to the Western situation and concludes that it is inherently different. The ruler not only of Russia, but also of the Byzantine state was able to integrate the Church into the framework of secular power and thereby exercise control over the religious domain. In the Byzantine Empire, where the political tradition was reinforced by the influence of Islam, the ruler used religion to strengthen the myth of legitimacy, according to which the Empire was

divinely ordained, so that religion could never emerge as an autonomous, competitive value in the way that it did in Europe.¹³ The Byzantine Empire, with its traditional urban civilization and centralized bureaucratic state structure, was the opposite of the Western European division of power, and Islam combined elements of Persian-Byzantine structures with its own military-theocratic autocracy. Therefore, Szücs' conclusion is that the Byzantine Empire did not partake in the Western European or, according to Schöpflin, in the European model of development.¹⁴ Central Europe, on the other hand, notwithstanding the intermediate and liminal, pervious nature of the area between Latin and Orthodox lands, emerged as a part of Western Christianity and thus firmly associated with the West.¹⁵

As the collapse of the communist block was becoming more apparent, the American scholarship also divided Eastern Europe into East-Central Europe and Southeastern Europe,¹⁶ something that Szücs had done as early as 1983. The latter was a name for the Balkans coined by the German geographer Otto Maul in 1929 in order to overcome "the standing historical-political dichotomy between the Danubian monarchy and the Ottoman Balkans that had become irrelevant."¹⁷ Ironically, this term recurred in the last decade of the twentieth century during the demise of the multinational and multicultural state of Yugoslavia, when the dichotomy between the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires became relevant again. The shocking, violent dissolution of the former Yugoslavia inspired scholars to revisit the cultural and political mapping of Europe, this time focusing on the abovementioned Ottoman-Habsburg historical border. Todorova's highly resonant book *Imagining the Balkans*, whose first edition was published in 1997, two years after the Dayton Peace Agreement between the warring sides in the former Yugoslavia, is a result of the political disputes over cultural belonging and unbelonging that eventually turned into armed conflicts. Todorova's draws the geographical borders of the Balkans in her *Imagining the Balkans* as follows:

The standard approach of geographers distinguishes between a *stricto sensu* physico geographical definition, and one employed for more practical purposes. The first accepts as the undisputed eastern, southern, and western borders the Black Sea, the Sea of Marmara, the Aegean, Mediterranean, Ionian, and Adriatic Seas.¹⁸

It is significant that the northern geographical border of the Balkans is the most disputed one, indeed that is the border which was used as a political argument during the wars in the former Yugoslavia. According to Todorova,¹⁹ geographically "it is most often considered" to begin at the mouth of the river Idria in the gulf of Trieste and to coincide with the Sava and the Danube rivers. It is disputed because here the geographical and the cultural definitions of the region based on historical metanarratives collide, and every attempt to determine the border opens a Pandora's box of historical and cultural argumentation. The Byzantine-Ottoman legacy defines, according to Todorova,²⁰ the cultural map of the Balkans, but the above geographical definition includes also Slovenia, a territory that has never been part of either the Byzantine or Ottoman Empires, as well as the European part of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans and therefore questions not only the border between the Balkans and Europe, but also the border between the Orient and the Occident.

The disagreements and difficulties in naming and mapping the Balkans show the crisis of geography as "a concept, a sign system and an order of knowledge established at the centers of power."²¹ Abandoning the "sequentially unfolding narrative" and historical thinking, Soja introduces the concept of postmodern human geography and proposes spatialization of the historical narrative that would emphasize "the combination of time and space, history and geography, period and region, sequence and simultaneity."²² The postmodern and critical human geography provides us with a new vision that allows us to see in different ways "the interplay of history and geography, the vertical and horizontal dimensions of being in the world [...]" (11). Like Rogoff, Soja points to the "relations of power and discipline [...] inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality" and the interference of politics and ideology with human geographies.²³

Drawing on the "spatial turn" paradigm proposed by Soja, Blažević suggests the use of the term "Balkan" "as a flexible, dynamic, and relational heuristic concept [...] [that] enables and promotes a critical, multi-perspective and self-reflexive thinking about space," rather than as a criterion for symbolic inclusion/exclusion, i.e., belonging or not belonging to Europe. Precisely postmodern geography opens the possibility of conceptualizing "space as a dynamic network," in which "heterogeneous historical trajectories [...] [are] densely interwoven with the asymmetrical relations of power." The Balkans should therefore be reconceptualized as "a space of permeation and overlapping, where individual and collective identities have constantly been (re)created in the game of attraction and rejection."²⁴

Indeed, since the beginning of Modern Age, the Balkans have been variously part of the Byzantine, Ottoman, and even the Austro-Hungarian Empires, and their border with Central Europe has never been clearly established, or rather consistently debated. In relation to Europe "proper," this region has always been considered a border between the Orient and the Occident. Therefore, I propose that cultural multi-belonging, historical disruption, and recurrence of conflicting

identities are the ongoing processes which replace the concept of a common identity for the Balkans and require a plurality of mobile and adjustable perspectives as interpretative strategies for viewing this region considered as a cultural and geopolitical space.²⁵

In order to circumvent the aporia in the attempt to define the borders of the Balkans I have identified four different *Sub-Balkans*²⁶ based on the interactions between different external centers of power, or simply empires, which have been most dominant in each, on the one hand, and collective local identities formed in a “game of attraction [to] and rejection”²⁷ from the centers of power, on the other. One Balkan region was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and thus has long been considered part of Central Europe’s cultural heritage, as Kundera has pointed out. This area includes parts of Croatia and possibly all of Slovenia. A second *Sub-Balkan* includes regions that were part of both the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Vojvodina, Hungary, and parts of Croatia and Romania. These regions admit to a mixed heritage—to Austrian Catholic and to Turkish-Islamic influences. Like Slovenia and Croatia, Hungary also belongs to Central Europe. The third *Sub-Balkan* region is comprised by the territories populated by Slavic peoples and includes Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, or simply the former Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria. Finally, a fourth *Sub-Balkan region*, which could bear the epithet “most Balkan,” was part of both the Ottoman and Byzantine Empires, an area including Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro, Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, and part of today’s Romania. The delineations of this region must account for Greek, Greco-Roman, and Islamic influences, which is why it lies somewhat outside of the paradigmatic Slavic/European ethnic divide figuring in European thought.²⁸

It is obvious that the imaginary and vague Eastern Europe observed from the West disappears when the European border regions are observed from within, but only to give way to another kind of imagination. Egon Schwarz criticizes Kundera, on the one hand, for his idealized depiction of Central Europe in the past as a small universe of great national diversity unified by culture, without any mention of the dark force of anti-Semitism, which for Schwarz is a Central European product par excellence,²⁹ and on the other for his cultural pessimism regarding the present and his despair about Europe’s inability to provide the greater spiritual power for Central Europe because “Europe no longer perceives its unity as a cultural unity.”³⁰ Yet, he is willing to accept Kundera’s utopian notion of Central Europe as an entity that is not a state, but rather a culture or a fate with imaginary borders defined by the great common situations that reassemble and regroup peoples along the ever-changing boundaries that mark a realm inhabited by the same memories,³¹ a Central Europe that “is a symbol for what is not but should be.”³² Schwarz takes Kundera’s utopia one step further and advocates a utopian imagination that is based on the principles of European humanism, Enlightenment, and democracy like universalism, sympathy for ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences, renunciation of aggression, abandonment of ready-made ideologies, and respect for the human being, to mention but a few,³³ a Central Europe which becomes a model for a better Europe.

Can the utopian imagination for a better Europe be extended to the Balkans? Homi Bhabha developed the concept of cultural difference that functions in opposition to cultural diversity.³⁴ Cultural diversity in West-European plural democratic societies is based on a transparent norm given by the host society or dominant culture that functions as a grid within which the other cultures are located and evaluated, thus creating a containment of cultural difference. The notion of cultural difference, however, is a position of liminality, a productive space of the construction of culture as difference in the spirit of alterity or otherness.³⁵ From this point of view, the Balkans are the paradigmatic liminal space within Europe that cannot be positioned in the European universalist grid and evaluated from a singular normative stance. My pluralistic concept of cultural multi-belonging dismisses the notion of center and allows us to see Balkan cultures as incommensurable both to one another and to the normative notions of European culture.

The imagination of a better Europe must include transgression of both cultural boundaries and political borders between the Balkans and Europe, because the alternative means condemning the Balkans to a marginalized existence, geographically close but politically endlessly far away from the remainder of the continent, living under constant threat of new conflicts. This imagination was once political reality in the state of the former Yugoslavia. In his play *Voyage by Dugout* (1999),³⁶ the ostracized Austrian author Peter Handke dared imagine entirely peaceful Balkans based on a “post-historical” society from the until recently warring region of the former Yugoslavia, in which the small nations of the Balkan-Central European space overcome religious and cultural divisions imposed throughout history by external political forces and unite in the name of centuries-old local coexistence despite imperial conquests, or, as we would say today, globalization.³⁷

The small nation, then, recurs as a concept. Kundera attributes it first to Central, and then even to entire Europe:

Thus it was in this region of small nations [...] that Europe's vulnerability, all of Europe's vulnerability, was more clearly visible before anywhere else. Actually, in our modern world where power has a tendency to become more and more concentrated in the hands of a few big countries, *all* European nations run the risk of becoming small nations and of sharing their fate. In this sense the destiny of Central Europe anticipates the destiny of Europe in general [...].³⁸

Must the state of being as a small nation be of disadvantage? In the *Realpolitik*, probably so. Yet, we must not forget that the EU itself was, among other things, established as a family of mostly small nations, despite the very few relatively large members, which are nonetheless dwarfed by countries like the United States, Russia, or China. Both Kundera and Handke are actually in search of the best imaginable framework that would house the cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity of the small countries in both spaces, against the backdrop of traumatic histories and despite the challenges of globalization.

Schwarz argues that the use of the term Central Europe in the present is accompanied by "a strong uneasiness in view of the increasingly hysterical confrontations between the ideological powers, which threaten to crush everything in their path and under whose rule we find ourselves searching for spiritual freedom [and] an identity of our own [...]."³⁹ Published in 1989, this paragraph could not describe better our own times. Caught in the renewed antagonism between the US and Russia, the wars in the Middle East, and the run-away train of globalization, the Europeans seem to have lost their own authentic identity and are left with the shabby, already-seen nationalist and xenophobic ideologies of the populist and nationalist parties and movements, which they thought could only prosper in the uncultivated Balkans.

Kundera's cultural pessimism has unfortunately been proved right, the questions he posed in 1984 resonate more strongly than ever:

But [...] [w]hat realm of supreme values will be capable of uniting Europe? Technical feats? The market place? The mass media? [...] Or [...] politics? But [...] which politics? The right or the left? Is there a discernable shared ideal that still exists above this Manicheanism of the left and the right [...]? Will it be the principle of tolerance, respect for the beliefs of other people? But won't this tolerance become empty and useless if it no longer protects a rich creativity or a strong set of ideas?⁴⁰

All "values" mentioned by Kundera are presently forces which divide European societies and alienate citizens from the state. Not even tolerance, which in the mid-eighties of the twentieth century seemed to be a permanent value, is today a matter of course. Europe, Central Europe, and the Balkans are all in desperate need of their own re-invention, which must begin with a re-examination of the past, especially of the traumatic experiences and failures to come closer to a vision of a unified and peaceful continent that will also respect the sovereignty of each and every member state, as Kundera was wishing for the Central European states unwillingly attached to the Warsaw Pact.

¹ Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford UP, 1994)

² Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994)

³ Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe." *New York Review of Books* 31.7 (26 April 1984): 33–38, 38.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁹ Szücs, *Die drei historischen Regionen Europas* (Frankfurt /M: Neue Kritik, 1994), 13-14.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 16-17.

¹² Ibid., 17-18.

¹³ George Schöpflin, "Central Europe: Definitions Old and New," in *In Search of Central Europe*, eds. George Schöpflin and Nancy Wood (Cambridge: Polity P, 1989), 13.

¹⁴ Szücs, 23.

¹⁵ Schöpflin, 19-20.

¹⁶ Mariia Nikolaeva Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997), 140.

¹⁷ Ibid., 29.

¹⁸ Ibid., 30.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 160.

²¹ Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 20.

²² Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 1-2.

²³ Ibid., 6.

²⁴ Zrinka Blažević, "Globalizing the Balkans: Balkan Studies as a Translation/Translational Paradigm," *Kakanien Revisited* (22 June 2009):1-2, accessed 4 June 2013, doi: <http://www.kakanien.ac.at/beitr/balkans/Blazevic1.pdf>.

²⁵ Ana Foteva, *Do the Balkans Begin in Vienna? The Geopolitical and Imaginary Borders between the Balkans and Europe* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 2.

²⁶ Ibid., 8.

²⁷ Blažević, 2.

²⁸ Foteva, 9-11.

²⁹ Egon Schwarz, "Central Europe – What It Is, and What It Is Not," in *In Search of Central Europe*, eds. George Schöpflin and Nancy Wood (Cambridge: Polity P, 1989), 152.

³⁰ Kundera, 36.

³¹ Kundera, 35.

³² Schwarz, 154.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Homi K. Bhabha and Jonathan Rutherford, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha, in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 208–209.

³⁵ Ibid., 209.

³⁶ Peter Handke, *Die Fahrt im Einbaum oder Das Stück zum Film vom Krieg* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1999).

³⁷ Ana Foteva, "Handke's *Die Fahrt im Einbaum*: Utopia as a Counter-Historical Performance." *Seminar* 53.1 (forthcoming 2017): 44 pp.

³⁸ Kundera, 36.

³⁹ Schwarz, 153.

⁴⁰ Kundera, 36.

Bio

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