A new decade for social changes
Mythologization of the Balkans in Postmodern Period: Bosnia and Herzegovina between Desire and Reality

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Abstract. In this article, authors attempt to provoke the need of renewed understanding and researching related to the mythologization of the Balkans in Postmodern period. In the midpoint of this article is postmodern critic of international experts for legitimacy in ‘new state democracy’ (for example Bosnia and Herzegovina). Authors will try to make distinction between what is reality on the ground and what is the desirable model of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Europe. Regardless of various processes that are ongoing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is not possible to move away from mythological narratives and concepts.

Keywords. mythologization, Balkans, internationalization, Europe, identities, Bosnia and Herzegovina, postmodern period

“Every individual is a meeting ground for many different allegiances, and sometimes these loyalties conflict with one another and confront the person who harbors them with difficult choices”.
Amin Maalouf

Introduction
The primal idea is to present our views on today’s postmodern Bosnia and Herzegovina in historical, political, and cultural contexts bearing in mind an ongoing mythologization of the Balkans and its consequences within European settings. We are representing specific standpoint meaning deconstruction of emerging tendency towards new polarization within EU and ‘the latest’ construction of Balkans as the “the others within Europe”. Methodology that will be used is the analyses of content taking into the consideration contemporary status of the Balkans and especially Bosnia and Herzegovina. This will be the challenge to prove some theoretical arguments on hegemonistic discourse (internationalals) which describes Balkans and Bosnia and Herzegovina as ‘political and cultural others’. This narrative is still widespread in the postmodern discourse in the form of mythologization. One of the most popular stereotypes on the Balkans is that this region is cursed with too much history with an excess of historical memory and, as a result, with uncontrolled antient hatreds and proliferation and obdurate and incompatible ethnic and religious identities.

Balkans should be perceived in its wider extensions in particular to the EU formations, peace negotiations, diplomatic conferences, understanding and accepting fluctuations in the
Balkans and Bosnia and Herzegovina together with various interests of hard power states. Therefore, this region is divided on ‘our’ and ‘their’ region. Unfortunately, existing of EU is determined by clear conditions and geopolitical borders and the context of dividing ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’ cultures.

**Balkans between the Myth and an Idea**

The term of Balkans was established from the Turkish noun Balkans which means the forested mountains or *bal* as a honey and *kan* as a blood. In the book, *The Wild Europe* (2007) Slovenian author Bozidar Jezernik claims that the during 18 and 19 century the term European Turkey was the favor of geographical coins. According to his opinion between 1878 and 1908 Ottoman Empire has being reduced by different diplomatic conferences. Furthermore, explorers and journalists were coming into this region and popularized the term of Balkans. Maria Todorova has written the book *Imagining the Balkans*” and she argues that after the end of Second World War, in 1918 the term ‘Balkans peninsula’ had been disappearing and eventually it gained the political meanings. Furthermore, the notion of the Balkan identity according to Todorova has been always a cornerstone in both academic and political segments. Some authors such as Oto Maul and Mattias Bernat advocated for the replacement of term Balkans into South East Europe due to making a difference between the Danube Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire. During the thirties and forties of 20-century, the term South East Europe was being discredited because of its role in geopolitics of fascism.

We can say that both terms Balkans and South East Europe has been given negative connotations. These terms have become synonyms. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the begining of the new democracies in this region, the term Balkans was suppressed into the favor of the term South East Europe. We can describe this process as Kolozovska.underlined: “the Balkans ware dyeing in the blood and Europe was born in the Balkans territory”. New countries and new nations which were born after the fall of the Berlin Wall did not want to identify themselves with the Balkans. In our opinion, in this period the term Balkans has been getting more political than geographical meaning.

In the meeting of the European Council in Vienna in 1998 the EU created the term West Balkans. What isn’t the Balkans? Is the Balkans the European Union? Is the EU the same as Europe? Geographically, the new Balkans states are in Europe. Historically they are the part of Europe. But some of them aren’t members of the European Union. They are candidates for membership status. These countries need to do a lot in the future to become part of the European Union, which means to fulfil conditions that have been given by the member states. Which countries are included in Balkans? Encyclopedists usually disagree of these matters. According to French encyclopedia Le Petit Larousse Illustrate (1993) the Balkans is bounded by the rivers Sava and Danube on the North and includes countries such as Albania, Hungary, Croatia, Greece, Slovenia, Turkey (European part). On the other side, British encyclopedia Britannica (1996) claims that there are one million inhabitants in the Balkans. We can conclude that it is about people of the Balkans that are hostage of one incoherent geography. Oxford dictionary claims that Balkans, as an adjective, means hostility of Balkans States towards each other. In the Romanian language adjective Balkans means lagging behind, primitive or uncivilized. In Serbian dictionary, there is a difference between *Balkanac* with capital letter and *balkans* with a small letter. *Balkanac* with a capital letter is a person who lives in the Balkans while the small letter to show the someone’s characters. *Balkanac* with the small letter is someone who is a rude, uncivilized, intolerant and wild. Balkanism describes the insufficient culture of development. This understanding makes isolation of the Balkans even
greater and additionally strengthen feelings of isolation, which is created in the domain of mental and symbolical geographies. In the 15th century the Balkans was known as the name of mountains. Furthermore, in the 19th century the Balkans was marked as the name of peninsula and lately it became the name for entire region. As a metaphor, the Balkans has similarities with Said’s orientalism. In the 20th century the Balkans got a lot of negative implication because of the fall of Ottoman’s Empire. In the field of culture and arts, there could be found archaic, Greek and Roman heritage and costumes of many ethnic groups who have inhabited the peninsula.

In Google, there could be found 49,000 items which are related to the process of balkanization. What was the influencing factor to reinforce negative prejudice about the Balkans? We can find it in Todorava’s explanation of balkanism. She states that are still attempts to postulate the linguistic basis of a specific Balkan mentality and existence of homo balkanicus. This is referred to the particular Balkans propensity for the myths, legends, metha narratives, and testimonies. Those elements are constantly transmitted throughout education, political, media, social networks and other cultural channels.

The society and demography of this region is following: the processes of migration, ethnical diversities, semi-nomadic way of life, a huge agrarian’s community and late urbanization. The Balkans is specific place with self-historical heritage (Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman Empire and communism). In terms of faith there could be found Christian, Muslim, and Jewish tradition. According to Todorova (Todorova 1999, 89), dominant heritages have determined this region until the 19 centuries. A millennium of Byzantium governance has brought permanent, institutional, legal, religious, and cultural influences on this region. Half of the millennia of the Ottoman Empire has brought a period of political unity in the whole of its history. According to Milica and Robert Bakić Hyden (1992) Byzantium and Ottoman heritages represented religious and cultural Others of Europe.

Stereotypes about Others, as perpetual Others were revitalized during and after Yugoslav wars. This strategy related to stereotypes is usually far away not only from Europe but also from the new formed Balkans’ states. In the past, historical memory and its manipulation have been suggested to be one of the central aspects of the Balkans’ identity and consequently of the Balkan’s conflicts.

Generally speaking, stereotypes mentioned above produced three types of identification which were based on the attempted escape from Balkans’ identity. The radical migration was the first strategy. The second strategy of escape from the Balkans was to escape into the opposite directions, into nationalism, which also meant anti-Balkan. These nationalistic identities we’re based on differentiation from neighbours and other ethnic and religious groups. The third form of avoiding identification with Balkans identity is the most complex. It is an interlacing premodern, modern and postmodern representation which has being being uniting in a new quality named Balkans Popular Culture (turbo folk). This strategy aimed to change negative pictures about the Balkans and converted its stigma into a cheerful composition of pleasure. Popular Culture started to promote and deepen exactly those stereotypes such as orientalism, backwardness, intima, hedonistic escape, nakedness, and vulgarity. It seems like a shape of voluntary regression in the huge, scandalous Balkans environment. It is a attack of balkan popular culture to the ‘civilized world’.

Intellectually based, ironical based, postmodernist discourse of Balkan popular culture is represented by other artists whose major goal is to reconstruct Balkan stereotypes and prejudice in the intellectual and progressive manner. In the context of Todorova’s theory, Balkan mentality has been one of the most used myths in the public discourse. An influence of
this Balkan mentality narrative was obvious in behavioral patterns and attitudes of international workers during and after war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**Myth of an Internationalization in Postmodern Bosnian Society**

In the article “Ambivalent Builders: Europeanization, the Production of Difference, and Internationals in Bosnia and Herzegovina.”, Kimberley Coles explains the role of the international community in rebuilding Bosnia and Herzegovina after the brutal war and ethnic cleansing campaign left the country’s institutions in shambles. Internationals, as Coles calls them, are the mostly European “‘experts’ that design and implement...state-building and society-molding strategies” (Coles 2007, 257). Internationals in Bosnia consisted of foreign aid workers, diplomats, military personnel, security officers, lawyers, and bureaucrats. While these professionals were there to help the country recover after years of devastating fighting, they also had another motive: to Europeanize Bosnia. They wanted not just to rebuild Bosnia, but to reshape Bosnia into a country that more closely resembled their home countries in Europe (Coles 2007, 262). The confusing part about this is that Bosnia was already a part of Europe. The Balkans are geographically a part of the continent. However, what made Bosnia different to the rest of Europe was its unique culture. Firstly, Bosnia is much more ethnically diverse; it has multiple major religions (Islam, Catholicism, Orthodox and Judaism) and multiple major ethnic groups (Muslims, Croats, and Serbs). As a result, Bosnia does not share the broader European culture, which is predominantly Christian. In addition, Bosnia was a former socialist republic, putting it at odds with the rest of Europe’s capitalist democracies. Many international workers felt Bosnia had been susceptible to ethnic conflict because it was not modern enough, or not European enough. The international community set out to change that after the war and, in the process, demonstrated attitudes toward Bosnians that resembled Europe’s old imperialistic attitudes of the 19th century. Bosnia was not the first country that the Western world tried to change, and, as we see with recent American initiatives in the Middle East, it would not be the last.

Let us look more closely at the internationals in post-war Bosnia and try to better understand their imperialistic mindset. To be clear, we do not say that Bosnia was a European colony, nor we are not saying that the Bosnians were treated even remotely as badly as former Europeans subjects. In fact, we could argue that many reforms instituted by international organizations in Bosnia were beneficial and helped stabilize the country after years of turmoil.

Getting back to the internationals in Bosnia, it is important to understand the prevailing opinion of Bosnians in the eyes of the international community. To many Europeans, Bosnia was considered an “European alter-ego” (Coles 2007, 259). Coles expands on this idea when she includes this quote said by an international worker on the ground in Bosnia: “‘Well, they [Bosnians] aren’t really European, are they? They have a completely different attitude!’” (Coles 2007, 258). Bosnia was considered Europe’s less sophisticated and less modern younger sibling who did not yet have “...proper discipline or self-governance techniques that successful ‘Europeans’ were thought to hold” (Coles 2007, 265). Internationals believed that for Bosnia to prosper, it had to become more like Europe; it needed to replace its centuries-old culture with mainstream European culture. These internationals saw it as their mission to “civilize” Bosnia. Internationals touted European organizations, such as the European Union, as the solutions to all of Bosnia’s problems; anything contrary to European ideals needed to be reformed. However, Bosnia was hesitant to adopt some of these reforms, which often created animosity between Bosnians and their international counterparts. Internationals often lacked a general understanding of Bosnian culture, and they looked down on the Bosnian way of life.
Meanwhile, they expected Bosnians to adhere to the new laws being put in place while they openly avoided these laws, making many Bosnians feel like second-class citizens in their own country. Ultimately, though, the most significant disconnect between the two parties came from the international community trying to change Bosnia too much and too fast. Bosnia was not prepared to—nor did it want to—give up its own culture to fit in with the rest of Europe. Internationals failed to understand this concept, as they believed that their way of life was optimal, and that any country would be eager to become European if it had the chance. For example, this century, the United States has taken a similar approach in the Middle East as the Europeans took in Bosnia.

Generally speaking, the International Community has invested tremendous efforts in transition of Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, not in terms of classical transition to which all other countries of the region were subjected – transition towards full market economy, parliamentary democracy and generally civil society, but in transition, and what we want to emphasize it here, from the state of war to peace.

Or, transition towards a market economy, parliamentary democracy, and civil society, however, in the framework of ethnic nationalism which resulted not in liberal democracy but in ‘ethnocracy’. The International community had an important stake in many reforms such as legislation, judiciary, and media. It imposed the whole spectrum of legal solutions in many spheres of society, and also decisions such as those on introduction of common currency, common registration plates, the imposition of the Law on National Hymn, flag, etc. However, such all new solutions and decisions were brought without wider consultation with the public in general. An illustrative example is the imposition of the Law on Elections which reached full support of all key agents of the international community in Bosnia. Still, the draft of this Law has been almost unanimously rejected by domestic legal experts.

Thus, the key mechanism in the development of Bosnian democracy in the postmodern context – the election system remained discriminatory to its citizens. Of course, every contemporary political order – in one or the other way – discriminates its citizens-but the point with Bosnian ethnopolitical system is that it further deepens ethnic divisions and antagonizes its citizens on ethnic grounds, which is perfect field for production of various mythologies about Balkans habits and culture in this small country. It further undermines any attempt to consolidate civil, modern, open society what is pledged by European Union.

Lastly, the ethnic and cultural identity has become the primary political identity, and is therefore a reductionist one in that a citizen gains her or his political relevance only as a member of this or that ethnic or cultural group, which is at the same time fully a-political identity.

In the public sphere only pseudo-political debates and polemics dominate they are in fact desirable and favorable. „Bosniacs “are verbally opposed to the politics of „Croats ‘and Serbs ‘, and the other way around, „Croats ‘are in opposition to „Serbs ‘and „Bosniacs ‘. Naturally, Serbs oppose the other two in return. So, these three political agents of ethnic formula became instruments of differentiation in all segment of living. This contribute to already existing myths of the ‘no man’s land’ land and the country of ‘blood and honey’.

As we already claimed above, the ethnic identity has become the primary political and anti-EU identity. That is, the entire political sphere has been reduced to some form of political sophistry which discourages any constructive approach, arrangement and transcendence of political games, as Bieber stressed out „within which one wins only when the other loses“ (Bieber 2004, 135).

The experience has convinced us that the ethnopolitics is indeed the mechanism of production of permanent ethnic crisis, specific in the Balkans and state of endangement.
Bosnian Reality after the Desire of Internationalization

True, the war stopped, and Bosnian borders have been protected in Dayton, Ohio, 1995, from every external pretension by the neighbors, however, internal borders are so hard and far from European democracy. Something is wrong because after 25 years we cannot detect liberal optimism and believes in the power of democracy. Maybe defects of Dayton Peace Agreement are the consequences on mythological narratives on Balkans, because, still in academic and art circles there are serious discussions on what and to whom the Balkans means to. The significance of Balkans is re actualized again by the new diplomatic conferences that became places for reflection of fundamental tensions between great global forces. Since the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed, Bosnia and Herzegovina serve as an international experiment in which desires of internationals are still not fulfilled or put it in ironically way, they are. Because, they undermine one of the last multiethnic state in the Balkans, forcing it to live upon the principles one state, one host domestic nation with smaller number of minorities as much as possible. Bosnia and Herzegovina live in the state of permanent semi disintegration, without a legal and legitimate Constitution, with a paradox structure of the state and society, and with an uncertain future, created also by internationals.

Firstly, after the Dayton Peace Agreement Bosnia and Hercegovina was divided into two entities. One of them is Republika Srpska where the majority of the population are Serbs, and the other part is Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which also means Federation of Bosniacs and Croats with 10 Cantons. Besides the two entities, we also have the District of Brčko which is like a third entity, but at the same time it is not an entity, yet it has everything that RS and Federation have.

Secondly, most of the critics of the Dayton Agreement point at the destructive consequences of the insistence on “ethnic qualifications for membership in key institutions and ethicized processes of decision making within them”. With the signature of the Dayton Agreement nationalist and ethnical ideological elements have been transported to a wider social and cultural context, while general or common good or public interest has been reduced to ethnic or party affiliation only.

Thirdly, the decision-making on the constitutional arrangement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has its source outside Bosnia, brings us to the question whether Bosnia and Herzegovina is a semi protectorate or true protectorate of the International community? A slight note, for those not familiar with it, there is an Office of the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina with strong authority and jurisdiction.

The constituent peoples are understood as the three separate ethno-national wholes which, according to the Constitutional logic, function as separate societies with the sovereignty of their own, without any sensibility for the individual rights and the minorities.

The European Court of Human Rights has found discrimination in several cases against Bosnian and Herzegovina (such as the most recognized the case of Sejdic-Finci). This case represents the denial of the right of national minorities to run for the Bosnia and Herzegovina Presidency and the House of Peoples. Even though the judgments came more than 10 years ago, Bosnia and Herzegovina have not enforced them because it would mean that the existing architecture of the state could change. Compared to all states that came out of the breakup of Yugoslavia, Bosnia and Herzegovina has already in the Preamble of its Constitution declared

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1 At the state, entity and canton levels, there are 260 ministers and delegates, which places Bosnia and Herzegovina on the list of countries with the highest number of ministers per capita. Bosnia and Herzegovina have spent half of its gross annual product on the administration itself, while in other countries it is ten percent.
its citizens and members of national minorities as „Others“. The Constitution provides that Bosnia and Herzegovina is the state of Serbs, Croats, Bosniacs and „Others“.

The relations of so called „constituent“ towards the so-called non-constituent people (Jews, Roma, Ukrainians, Polish, Check, Italians, Hungarians, Albanians, Slovenians, Macedonians, Montenegrins, etc.) who live in Bosnia can be seen as discriminatory. Hence, it can be concluded that the ethnopolitical conflicts are conflicts with the ‘political and ‘colored by mythological. This confirms Maalouf’s statement about identities as different allegiances where loyalties to the specific identities became mutual conflict and makes everything harder, especially in confirmation of identity proclaimed by the European Court of Human Rights.

**Instead of Conclusion**

Do we know enough about relations between Europe and the Balkans and Bosnia and Herzegovina? The term Europe as a term the Balkans are objectified as a name, place, and idea. As a name, the term Europe is based on the ancient Greek myth and Balkans refer to the peninsula. As a place, both are places of undetermined borders which depend not only on geographical but also on ideological factors. As an idea, Europe and the Balkans are very important cultural constructs that require renewed understanding and researching. Certain positions of Maria Todorova and others in their theoretical views can still be a significant academic and scientific tool against production of stereotypes and prejudices towards the Balkans, more specifically, non-EU members.

Bearing in mind the intensity and complexity of political and ethnic conflicts (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, etc.), the degree of their destructiveness, today it is of the most importance to refocus our attention to the protection of individual rights and the rights of national minorities that are fogged by mythological constructs and narratives even in postmodern period.

So far, in today’s European context, similarities among ethnic and race groups today could be found in the practice of negation of the other side, and not in their common ground for the establishment of new relations. They are the negative identities. It is even more important to try to create more positive identities which could solve one of those conflicts in postmodern time.

On the end, we can conclude, that democratic life in a country where is an international community very influential isn’t perfect and happy, and that European and Bosnian democracies are not infallible, neither inside nor outside, and that roots, history and mythologies are all that is important in the end.

**References**


