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Abstract

The term *Western Balkans* is employed so frequently in European politics, academic literature and international relations that it usually appears to be a natural and self-explanatory category. However, the boundaries of it remain unclear. Its meaning remains contested and its future uncertain. This thesis looks at historical construction, political instrumentalisation, and cultural contestation of the Western Balkans from the late nineteenth century to the present day. It is tracing the evolution of the region through the legacies of empire, the experience of Yugoslavia, the conflicts of the 1990s and the enlargement policies of the European Union. Employing historical analysis, discourse analysis, comparative analysis and expert interviews, this thesis contends that the Western Balkans is not best understood as a fixed geographical region, but rather as a political category whose meaning has continuously shifted according to changing geopolitical interests and ideas of European Belonging. Particular attention is devoted to the role of the European Union in defining, maintaining and reshaping this category, as well as to the diverse ways in which states within the region have embraced, rejected or reinterpreted this label. The findings indicate that the term represents the latest expression of a much longer history of external involvement in the region. Although the European Union did not create the Balkans, it had transformed them into a distinct political category through the process of enlargement and conditionality. Consequently, the thesis concludes that the term Western Balkans continues to exist but not as a reflection of a stable geographical or cultural reality, rather because it remains embedded in the political structure and institutional practices that continue to define parts of Europe as not yet fully inside.

Der Begriff Westbalkan wird in der europäischen Politik und akademischen Literatur sowie in den internationalen Beziehungen derart häufig verwendet, dass er gemeinhin als objektive und selbsterklärende Kategorie angesehen wird. Die genaue begriffliche Abgrenzung ist jedoch unklar. Die vorliegende Masterarbeit beleuchtet die historische Entwicklung, politische Instrumentalisierung und kulturelle Auseinandersetzung mit dem Westbalkan-Begriff vom späten 19. Jahrhundert bis in die Gegenwart. Sie zeichnet den Wandlungsprozess der Region angesichts der Nachwirkungen imperialer Fremdherrschaft, der Erfahrung eines gemeinsamen, jugoslawischen Staates und der anschließenden Konflikte der 1990er Jahre, sowie der Erweiterungspolitik der Europäischen Union nach. Mittels historischer Analyse, Diskursanalyse, vergleichender Analyse und Expert:inneninterviews argumentiert die vorliegende Arbeit, dass Westbalkan nicht als eine genau festgelegte geographische Region verstanden werden sollte,

sondern stattdessen als eine politische Kategorie, deren Bedeutung sich infolge veränderter geopolitischer Interessen und Vorstellungen europäischer Zugehörigkeit stetig verändert hat. Besonderes Augenmerk gilt dabei einerseits der Rolle der Europäischen Union bei der Definition, Aufrechterhaltung und Umgestaltung dieser Kategorie und andererseits der Frage, wie sie in den unterschiedlichen Ländern aus der Region übernommen, abgelehnt oder neu interpretiert wurde. Die gewonnenen Erkenntnisse deuten darauf hin, dass der Begriff der aktuellste Ausdruck einer langen Geschichte externer Einflüsse in der Region ist. Obwohl die Europäische Union den Begriff Balkan nicht erfunden hat, war sie mit ihrer Erweiterungs- und Konditionalitätspolitik dennoch entscheidend bei dessen Umwandlung in eine eigenständige politische Kategorie. Die vorliegende Masterarbeit kommt daher zu dem Schluss, dass der Westbalkan-Begriff zwar Bestand hat, allerdings nicht als Ausdruck einer etablierten geographischen oder kulturellen Realität, sondern aufgrund seiner Einbettung in bestehende politische Strukturen und institutionelle Praktiken, die nach wie vor Teile Europas als noch nicht gänzlich zugehörig definieren.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis, titled *Redefining the Western Balkans: Boundaries, Identities, and the Politics of Regional Categorisation*, began from the need to critically examine how the Western Balkans came to be defined, interpreted and deployed as a regional category across different historical and political contexts. The choice of the term “redefining” will be reflected in the argument that the Western Balkans is neither a fixed geographic space, nor is it a stable cultural identity. It is rather a concept that was shaped by imperial legacies that were changing a great deal of times, the state-building of the twentieth century, fragmentation that came after conflicts and the institutional vocabulary of the European Union. By the use of the words “boundaries” and “identities”, the thesis is pointing toward the processes through which political borders, cultural affiliations and regional labels have simultaneously been created, contested and also remodelled over time. At the same time, the reference to the “politics of regional categorization” points toward the emphasis of this thesis of the importance on the role of international actors, especially the European Union and its constructing of the meaning of the Western Balkans that we have today and in its defining of the difference between the states that are included in it, and the ones that are excluded from it.

Stemming from the abovementioned deliberations is this thesis question: *How has the term “Western Balkans” been historically constructed, politically instrumentalised, and culturally contested from the late nineteenth century to the present, and is this category now transforming or disappearing as a result of European integration and changing regional identities?*

This topic, and with it, this question, did not come only out of scholarly curiosity, but it also came from a personal confrontation with the power of regional labels and from being a witness to how such terms create perceptions, relationships and hierarchies within Europe. Growing up in Bosnia and Herzegovina and later moving to Slovenia, had exposed me to different understanding of regional belonging and identity within Europe itself. It had also accentuated the extent to which those regional labels continue to shape perceptions of states, societies and individuals across the continent. Those experiences drew my attention to the political and cultural importance of those very terms, such as “Balkans” and “Western Balkans”. Those two terms are quite frequently used in public discourse, in policy-making and in academic debate, yet they are often left without a clear consensus when it comes to their meaning or their boundaries.

The interest in this topic developed even more during my studies when I had encountered discussions which were suggesting that Slovenia, and even more so Croatia, are no longer considered part of the Western Balkans within the contemporary academic and political discourse. Those arguments raised a plethora of broader questions that went beyond the cases of only these two

countries: How can an identity of a country change so dramatically with a signature on an accession treaty? How can societies that have shared a state, a culture and historical trajectory for decades less than forty years ago, all of a sudden be treated and understood as fundamentally different? What does it mean for the rest of us, whose countries still are outside of the EU's borders, to be defined by a label that is appearing to be disappearing once one enters the European mainstream? And maybe, most importantly: who has the authority to define these borders and identities in the first place?

These questions are the key to the importance of this research. The term "Western Balkans" is used all the time. Be it in European policy-making, international relations or academic discourse, it is rarely questioned with sufficient depth. It is existing and functioning as if it were an obvious category, but the boundaries of it seem to shift depending on political calculations, the expansion of the European Union or even some of the internal aspirations of states that are looking to distance themselves from that Balkan stigma in any way possible. Slovenia and Croatia offer very good examples: despite the history that they have shared while being a part of Yugoslavia, their cultural closeness to the region, or even their geopolitical location, they seem to have been classified for political convenience. This is suggesting that the Western Balkans is more than just a neutral or only a descriptive term. Rather, it is a contested category that is shaped by geopolitical interests and the self-perception of Europe.

Therefore, the argument of this thesis is that the Western Balkans is best understood as a fluid and contested space. Its meaning has evolved in response to imperial legacies, Yugoslav state-building, the trauma of the 1990s and the enlargement strategy of the European Union. By tracing the evolution of the Western Balkans, the thesis will show how the term has been used, and still is today, to separate "Europe" from what is seen as its unruly or unfinished periphery, and how such categorisation is affecting both the policies of international institutions and the lived experiences of individuals from that region. Simultaneously, the thesis will look to reclaim the possibility of defining the region on its own terms rather than merely accepting labels that are imposed from the outside. Lastly, the aim will also be to demonstrate that the Western Balkans is not only disappearing because of geography or culture itself, but because political membership is reconfiguring who is permitted to belong. If the term completely disappears as each country enters the European Union, then it was never a stable category to begin with. And if so, why have it in the first place?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The question of what exactly the Balkans are has occupied historians, political scientists, anthropologists, and specialists of the region for decades now. However, despite the vast amount of scholarship that is dedicated to the region, there is still a lack of clarity in consensus on how that region should be understood. Some of the scholars had approached the Balkans primarily through geography and history. Others have approached it through culture and identity. While a growing body of literature argues that the region itself is less a fixed reality than it is a category whose meaning has been continuously shaped and reshaped by political circumstances. Once the attention is shifted to the other term, the “Western Balkans”, this debate becomes even more complicated. Western Balkans is a label which appears quite frequently in contemporary political discourse, but the origins of it, its purpose and its significance remain contested.

The historical foundation of that region has been examined extensively by authors like Anderson (1966), Medlicott (1963), Stavrianos (1958), Jelavich (1983), Pavlowitch (1999), Yavuz and Sluglett (2011) and Skendi (1967). Their work is tracing the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the rise of nationalism, the Congress of Berlin, the Balkan wars and the birth of the modern Balkan states. These studies, together, are providing this thesis with a very important understanding of how the political landscape of Southeastern Europe was formed and why exactly that region had become a focal point of the competition between the Great Powers. While these authors do explain how the Balkans were developing historically, they are generally less concerned with how the region itself became a distinct category of analysis, or why it had come to occupy such a unique place within the imagination of Europe.

However, precisely this question is the one which becomes the focus of the later scholarship. The most influential contribution of that later scholarship, and with this of this thesis, remains Maria Todorova and her work on *Imagining the Balkans* (2009). Todorova’s work had fundamentally challenged the assumption that the Balkans could be understood as a purely geographical concept. Todorova (2009) had argued that by the nineteenth century, the Balkans had acquired a series of political and cultural meanings that have extended far beyond physical space. In the political discourse of the West, journalism, travel writing and diplomacy, the region became, more and more, associated with instability, fragmentation, violence and incomplete modernity. The central argument that Todorova (2009) makes is not that these perceptions came to be without any cause, but rather that they had evolved gradually into a strong framework through which the region was interpreted and understood. In doing this work, Todorova had taken the attention away from

the question of *where* the Balkans are and shifted it toward the question of *how* and *why* the Balkans came to be imagined in a particular way.

This approach had then been developed further by Bakić-Hayden (1955) and Goldsworthy (1998). Both authors have explored the relationship between the Balkans and Europe. They have shown how the region was usually portrayed as the internal “other” of Europe. Rather than existing outside of Europe, the Balkans had occupied an ambiguous position within it. They were European and not fully European at the same time. The concept of Bakić-Hayden, “nesting orientalism”, had shown how the perception of backwardness and civilisation were reproduced *within* the region itself. Goldsworthy had looked at the long-standing fascination of Western audiences with the Balkans as a space of conflict, exoticism and political instability. When put together, these works show that regional identities are not simply inherited from history, but are also formed through representation and discourse.

A similar line of argument appears in the work of Bryce and Čaušević (2019). They had challenged the simplistic understanding of the Balkans as a neutral divide between East and West. Rather than seeing this region as an exception to Europe, they had argued that the Balkans reveal many of the tensions that have historically formed Europe itself. The work that they have done is particularly important for this thesis as they highlight how categories like “Europe”, “the Balkans” and later “the Western Balkans” are neither neutral nor permanent. Instead, they are political and intellectual constructs whose meaning is dependant on changing of the historical contexts.

The literature on Yugoslavia is occupying another important place within this broader discussion. While a number of bodies of scholarship have focused on the causes that broke up Yugoslavia, authors like Djokić (2013), Milutinović (2013) and Spaskovska (2014) have turned their attention to what remained once Yugoslavia had disappeared. Their work is challenging the idea that the dissolution of the Yugoslav state had automatically erased the social, cultural, linguistic and historical ties that had developed during the twentieth century. Although these scholars are different in their interpretations, they are collectively suggesting that the post-Yugoslav space continues to function as an important historical reference point, shaping identities, memories, and regional interactions, long after it has disappeared politically. This perspective is relevant for this thesis and for a broader understanding of the contemporary Western Balkans, since many of these states which were grouped together under this label, were once a part of the same Yugoslav political space.

The birth of the modern term “Western Balkans” has brought, with itself, a modern and increasingly important body of literature. Compared to the term “Balkans”, which had developed

gradually over centuries, the Western Balkans came to be within a specific political context. Scholars like Kolstø (2016), Bechev (2017), Lika (2023) and Bačan (2021) generally do agree that the concept cannot be explained only through geography. Instead, they have located the origins of it in the post-Cold War period, and, more specifically, in the efforts of the European Union to manage the political consequences of the dissolution of Yugoslavia. In this literature, the Western Balkans are understood as a primarily political category which is connected to stabilization, enlargement, regional cooperation and integration into the EU. The sole fact that Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria and even Croatia later, gradually ceased to be included within the category, even though they still are Balkan geographically, shows the extent to which membership had depended on political status rather than physical location. Concurrently, scholars do disagree on what the term ultimately represents. For some of them, the Western Balkans remains a temporary category that will eventually disappear through European integration. Yet, others are of the opinion that it had evolved into a lasting geopolitical framework which had a political significance of its own. For example, Bechev (2017) had drawn attention to the growing importance of external actors like Russia, China and Türkiye. While, at the same time, Lika (2023), Kolstø (2016) and Bačan (2021), are questioning whether the category can still be understood only through the lens of the European Union enlargement. These debates show that the Western Balkans is more than simply a description of a region with a neutral undertone, but an active political concept whose meaning continues to evolve.

Despite the richness of their scholarships, an important gap remains. Studies on this region tend to focus on questions of representation and identity. Historical works are concentrating on imperial legacies, nationalism, state formation and Yugoslavia. The research done on the Western Balkans tends to begin in the late 1990s and treats the category mainly as a product of the policy of the European Union. The result of this is that these conversations are usually looked at in isolation from one another. This thesis seeks to bring them together.

The thesis argues that the Western Balkans should not be understood as an entirely new category that had emerged after the Yugoslav wars. Nor should it be looked at merely as an administrative label which was created by Brussels. The label rather represents the latest stage in a process which lasted much longer, through which the region had been continuously defined, redefined and reorganized by both, internal and external actors. By tracing the evolution of this from the late nineteenth century to the present day, this thesis seeks to show how older understandings of the Balkans still continue to shape contemporary debates about the Western Balkans and why the question of what the region is remains unresolved even today.

Chapter 3: Methodology

To tackle this research's problem, the thesis will rely on a qualitative research approach in order to examine the Western Balkans as a category whose meaning has evolved over time and whose boundaries remain politically contested. Since the main research question is concerned not only with the historical development, but also with questions regarding identity, categorisation and political interpretation, a qualitative methodology is especially suitable for the exploration of the complexity of this topic.

To answer the research question, the thesis is combining three complementary methods: discourse analysis, comparative analysis and semi-structured elite interviews. Each of these three methods is looking at a different dimension of the Western Balkans. Together, they provide a more thorough understanding of how the category came to be and why it is still important today.

The first method used is discourse analysis. This method is important because the Western Balkans is not simply a geographic designation. It is also a political and discursive construct that has been formed through language, policy and representation. Therefore, the analysis is focusing on European Union policy documents, official communications, enlargement strategies, political speeches and other institutional texts which have contributed to the defining of this region. Special attention is paid to the language which was used to present the Western Balkans as a post-conflict space, a transitional region, a candidate for integration, or as an "unfinished" part of Europe.

The second important method used is comparative analysis. This method is used to look at and understand what is similar and what is different between the states that have been grouped under the Western Balkans label. Particular attention is given to questions of identity formation, political development, European integration and how those countries respond to external categorisation. The most important comparison for this thesis is that of Slovenia and Croatia on the one hand, and the remaining Western Balkan states on the other. Even though Slovenia and Croatia do share a lot of historical experiences with the post-Yugoslav space, both of them have slowly moved beyond the Western Balkans category after their joining of the European Union. Comparing their path with the paths of the other states in the Western Balkan category gives an opportunity to examine the extent to which regional belonging is shaped by political status and external recognition, rather than by only geography or history.

The third and final part of this thesis methodology is consisting of semi-structured expert interviews. The analysis of the documents does provide a valuable insight into institutional and political understanding of the Western Balkans; however, these interviews have made it possible to

directly interact with individuals who have played an active role in regional cooperation, diplomacy, European integration, and academic debates concerning this region.

These interviews were conducted with five individuals whose professional experience shows different perspectives, different institutional and national contexts in the Western Balkans. These include: Josip Brkić, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina; Majlinda Bregu, former Minister of European Integration of Albania and Government Spokesperson, former Chair of the Parliamentary Committee for European Integration, and former Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council.; Goran Svilanović, former Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council and former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia and Montenegro; Valentin Inzko, former High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina; and Cirila Toplak, Professor of Political Science at the University of Ljubljana and former adviser on European affairs to the President of Slovenia.

The interviews were semi-structured in a sense that was permitting for a common set of questions while, at the same time, giving space for respondents to elaborate further on issues they consider especially important. The choice to do this format was made because this research pursues more than only factual information. It also seeks expert interpretations regarding the evolution of the Western Balkans as a political and conceptual category. Therefore, these interviews serve as a complementary source of evidence, and are helping to contextualise findings which were derived from the analysing of the documents and existing scholarship. Concurrently, rather than treating these interviews as definitive answers, this thesis is using them as expert perspectives that feed into to a bigger understanding of how the Western Balkans is perceived, defined and contested by those actors who have been directly involved in developing those regional and European debates.

Chapter 4: From Empire to Nation: Historical Foundations and Pre-Yugoslav Identity Formation (Mid-19th Century-1918)

The Balkans did not suddenly become a problem in 1878. By the time the diplomats were gathering in Berlin that summer, the region had already spent decades drifting toward crisis (Anderson 1966, 174). The Ottoman Empire had already ruled much of the peninsula for centuries, yet they were no longer able to maintain the same level of control they once had (Anderson 1966, 174). The authority of the Empire had unevenly weakened. As it did, local tensions, be it social, religious or political, began to crawl from under the rug (Anderson 1966, 184). What once might have been contained within the borders of an empire began spilling outward, which drew in the attention of other major powers in Europe (Anderson 1966, 186-193). The Balkans, in other words, were not only just a region anymore. They had become a question. A question that demanded an answer, even if the people who lived there wanted it, or not (Anderson 1966, 388).

That question, the so-called Eastern Question, was never only about the Ottoman Empire itself. It was more about what would happen *after* it. Russia saw an opportunity for itself in the vacuum. It was presenting itself as the protector of Orthodox Christians and, with that, it was pushing southward in search of influence and access to strategic waterways (Anderson 1966, 147, 180, 187, 199). Austria-Hungary was looking at those same developments with unease. It was afraid that the instability in the Balkans could and would possibly spill across its own borders, or even empower Slavic populations that were already in its empire (Anderson 1966, 180, 186, 193). Meanwhile, Britain was looking at the region from a distance. But not with indifference. Britain was maintaining the balance of power and also containing the expansion of Russia, as those were its primary concerns (Anderson 1966, 174, 195, 389, 397). By the mid-1870s, these competing interests had turned the Balkans into something that was far bigger than itself. It has turned it into a stage on which European rivalries were being played out in real time (Jelavich 1983, 186).

The crisis that then followed was not inevitable, but once it had begun, its escalation was quick (Stojanović 1939, 7). Uprisings all over the Balkans, the ever-growing fragility of Ottoman authority, they have created a situation that simply could not be contained (Stojanović 1939, 12-15). The later intervention by the Russians in 1877 had turned that regional crisis into a full-scale war. Its initial victory seemed, at least for a brief moment, to reshape the political future of the Balkans fully (Yavuz and Sluglett 2011, 24). Yet, that moment did not last. The Treaty of San Stefano had reflected all of Russia's ambitions, and was challenged very soon after by the other powers (Stoja-

nović 1939, 217, 233). Those other powers had refused to accept such a dramatic shift in the balance (Yavuz and Sluglett 2011, 57). The solution, or at least what has been presented as one, came in 1878 in the form of the Congress of Berlin (Anderson 1966, 210).

It is here that this chapter begins, with the Congress of Berlin in 1878. That is not because everything started in Berlin, but rather because something was agreed upon and fixed there, which would later prove very difficult to undo (Medlicott 1963, 400). The Congress did not create stability so much as it has imposed a new order (Yavuz and Sluglett 2011, 126). Borders had been redrawn, some of the states had been recognised, some of the other ones had been constrained, and entire regions were placed under new forms of control (Yavuz and Sluglett 2011, 57). Yavuz and Sluglett (2011, 57) noted that Austria-Hungary had moved into Bosnia and Herzegovina at the support of the British, the Ottoman Empire kept its authority elsewhere, though in a diminished and increasingly fragile form. What became from it was not a unified region that was moving toward its brighter future. It became a divided region. A region that was structured along those imperial lines that had brought with themselves a very different political and social consequence (Yavuz and Sluglett 2011, 126).

This chapter will follow what came out of that moment. It will look at how the Balkans, which were once a part of a single imperial framework, came to be split between two systems of rule: Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian (Anderson 1966, 217, 220). Also, how those systems were shaping the lives of the people who were living under those two empires. It will then look at how their authority was exercised, how the communities were organised, and how the people who were living there were navigating a world in which identity was not yet really fixed in the way that it later would be (Yavuz and Sluglett 2011, 204-218). It will then turn to the development of national movements, and it will not treat them as inevitable outcomes but as a response to those conditions that were changing. The last part of the chapter will move toward the Balkan wars and the years just before 1918, when what was left of the Ottoman rule in Europe had collapsed, and those new borders had hardened into place.

4.1. The Road to Crisis

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Balkans were not governed anymore in the way that empires are supposed to govern, consistently, predictably and from the centre outward. The authority of the Ottomans still did exist, but its function was not the same across all of its European territories (Jelavich 1983, 113, 127). In provinces such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and also parts of Macedonia, the imperial rule was arbitrated through local elites, religious institutions and by the ones who held the power in the region, rather than that power being enforced through

a strong and centralised administrative apparatus (Jelavich 1983, 48, 57-58). This was about more than just inefficiency. It was a reflection of a deeper problem with the structure itself. The empire was losing its capability to integrate its diverse population into a political order that existed and functioned as one (Sugar and Lederer 1969, 27).

For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, governance was relying on a combination of local Muslim elites who were in charge of the land and religious authority. That created a system in which the directives of the empire were being filtered through local interests (Jelavich 1983, 32, 36). In Albanian-inhabited regions, in the northern highlands, to be more precise, the control of the Ottomans was even more uneven. It was usually negotiated rather than it was imposed. Tribal structures and customary law continued to structure everyday life (Skendi 1967, 15-16). Concurrently, in Macedonia, what has left the room for the then growing instability was the administrative fragmentation and also overlapping jurisdiction, which further complicated the authority of the empire (Pavlowitch 1999, 146-147).

The significance of this, already mentioned unevenness, lies in the fact that it has created conditions in which the authority of the time could be challenged. It was not always out in the open, but it was persistent. The communities of peasants faced heavy, and usually very irregular, taxation (Sugar 1977, 104). Christian populations were existing in a system that had granted them communal autonomy through the so-called millet structure, but, at the same time, it made the political marginalisation of them deeper, and local grievances were accumulating over time without an actual way for their resolution (Sugar 1977, 109-110, 231). These tensions, at first, were only that, tensions. They did not translate into a large-scale rebellion just yet, but they did create an environment that was very sensitive and fragile, and in that kind of environment, unrest could and did emerge and spread (Sugar 1977, 104, 242).

When combined, this weakness of the empire and the local tension gave rise to what later became known as the *Eastern Question*. That term itself, even though it is widely used in European diplomatic circles, was not only about the decline of the Ottoman Empire. It was also referring to the problem that was created by that decline. More specifically, how the then powers of Europe would respond to it and how far they were willing to allow any single actor to benefit from it (Anderson 1966, 174, 397). Looking at it through this lens, the Balkans were transformed into a geopolitical question mark.

The most assertive and direct actor in this situation was Russia. The way that they were involved in the Balkans was more so enclosed in ideological terms. It was their mission to protect Orthodox Christians and Slavic populations (Yavuz and Sluglett 2011, 239). Of course, it was also, unmistakably strategic. Having the control, or even just influence, over southeastern Europe

would give the Russians greater access to the *Straits*, which would make their position both regionally and globally stronger. By the 1870s, the policymakers in Russia did not see an intervention only as a possibility no more, but rather as a need, especially when the unrest in the Ottoman territories grew (Yavuz and Sluglett 2011, 22, 65).

Austro-Hungarians, compared to the Russians, approached those same developments with caution. But also with ever growing concern (Jelavich 1983, 357). The southern frontier of the Empire was bordering directly on the Ottoman Balkans, and the instability there posed immediate risks. What was also happening at the time was the rise of Slavic political movements, be it in Serbia, or Bosnia or elsewhere. For Austria-Hungary, that was more than just an external development, and the reason for that is that the Empire already had its own large Slavic populations, and they were afraid of the potential it had to develop those same movements within itself (Stojanović 1939, 8, 30, 32). Concurrently, the expansion of the Russians into the region was threatening to them because of the possible upset of the balance of power in a way that Vienna could simply not accept (Stojanović 1939, 187). Because of this, the position of Austro-Hungary was very defensive, but also deeply engaging. They were looking to limit both the Ottoman collapse and the gain of the Russians, while being prepared to jump in and intervene if necessary (Stojanović 1939, 32).

The interest of the Brits was on a different scale, but it was in no means any less significant. British policymakers were not as concerned with the internal happenings of the Balkans; they were more concerned with what that meant on a broader scale regarding the changes in southeastern Europe. With the growing influence of the Russians, especially if it were to extend toward the Mediterranean, it would have been a direct threat to the British imperial routes, and it would have undermined the balance of power that was set at the time. This was the reason that Britain was supporting the preservation of Ottoman territorial integrity. It was not out of loyalty to the empire itself; it was a means of preventing an alternative that was more destabilizing (Anderson 1966, 174, 208).

These external interests in the area have made the situation even more volatile with the happenings on the ground. The uprising that had begun in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1875, its roots were in those local grievances: taxation, land relations, administrative abuse. But they spread very quickly. Bosnia and Herzegovina's neighbours, Serbia and Croatia, became involved. They also saw an opportunity to expand their own influence and support their fellow Slavic populations. When Russia got a wind of this, they took it as a justification for further intervention. In a short period of time, what had begun as a regional revolt had escalated into a crisis on an international scale (Pavlowitch 1999, 107-108).

This is showing that the region was not simply acted upon, it was participating in drawing in the attention from external powers. Local actors, be it peasants, political leaders or emerging national figures, they were not passive participants (Sugar 1969, 45). They were articulating their demands, they were forming alliances and they also positioned their struggles in terms that were resonating with the bigger ideological current, including nationalism. They were quite quickly absorbed into a diplomatic framework (Pavlowitch 1999, 73, 202). A framework that was dominated by the Great Powers, and in this, the decisions were made in line with strategic calculations rather than local priorities.

By the time that the Russo-Turkish war had broken out in 1877, the Balkans had already become a space in which internal and external forces were involved, very tightly at that. The war itself was led as much by Russian ambition and European reaction as it was led by the conditions within the Ottoman Empire. The outcome of the war, particularly the Treaty of San Stefano, briefly suggested a big configuration of the region in favour of the Russians. This outcome was proven unacceptable for the other powers in the end. That prepared the stage for a diplomatic intervention that would try to redraw the map once again (Yavuz and Sluglett 2011, 10, 24-25, 65).

4.2. The Crisis

By the mid-1870s, the tension that was already building across the Ottoman Balkans was no longer contained within local disputes (Jelavich 1983, 186, 350). It had previously appeared as scattered instability, which was now beginning to connect across space. It was drawing in actors together, conflicts and all of their ambitions, into a single crisis that was unfolding. The uprising that broke out in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1875 had not stayed localized for long. It spread across Bosnia, drawing in armed bands, irregular fighters and neighbouring sympathisers, and quite quickly became a focal point for broader political agitation (Pavlowitch 1999, 93, 108).

This unrest was changed into something much more consequential by the speed with which it intersected with organised political actors beyond the Ottoman structure. Serbia and Montenegro had declared war on the Ottoman Empire in 1876. They were offering their intervention as both a defence of Christian populations and as a continuation of their own state-building project. At that time, Serbia was under the leadership of *Prince Milan Obrenović*, and was far from being unified in its approach, but their decision to join the conflict was the reflection of both domestic pressures and the expectation that a bigger intervention by the rest of Europe might follow in. (Stojanović 1939, 17, 80, 88, 84). Montenegro was pursuing very similar goals, a combination of dynastic ambition with opportunities in the region, while being under the leadership of *Prince Nikola Petrović* (Jelavich 1983, 355; Stojanović 1939, 80, 84).

Ottomans responded to these developments in forceful ways; however, they were uneven. Their military efforts to suppress the uprisings and to defeat Serbian and Montenegrin forces were followed by episodes of violence that echoed far beyond the battlefield (Jelavich 1983, 347). There were a number of reported atrocities, most notably in the context of the *Bulgarian April Uprising of 1876*, which had widely circulated in Europe, had provoked public outrage and made the pressure that was put on the governments of the time to respond, much greater (Yavuz and Sluglett 2011, 479). These were the events that did more than just shape military outcomes. They had altered the political space in which decisions were made. This all had begun as a series of conflicts that were happening only within Ottoman territories, and it carried on as a moral and a political crisis that was requiring external resolution (Jelavich 1983, 352, 356).

Precisely in this changing context, Russia started their move from a diplomatic position to direct intervention (Jelavich 1983, 352, 356). With the pressure of pan-Slavic circles, with the failure of earlier diplomatic tries, and the image of the Ottoman Empire being incapable of stabilising the region on its own, they made a decision. The decision to declare war in *April 1877* (Yavuz and Sluglett, 24). Russian forces were advancing through the Balkans in a campaign that, despite logistical difficulties and significant resistance, had successfully pushed deep into the territory held by the Ottomans. Some of the significant moments, like the fighting at *Pleven (Plevna)* and the eventual crossing of the *Balkan Mountains*, reflected the intensity of the conflict and also how weakened the Ottomans were in earnest, to actually sustain prolonged resistance (Yavuz and Sluglett 2011, 24, 513).

By the early 1878, the outcome of the war was no longer in doubt. Russian troops have advanced to the outskirts of *Constantinople*, which in turn has forced the Ottoman side into negotiations. The outcome of it was the *Treaty of San Stefano*, which was signed in March 1878 (Yavuz and Sluglett 2011, 24). It was proposing a dramatic reconfiguration of the Balkan political landscape. At the center of it was the creation of a *large autonomous Bulgarian state*, that would be stretching from the Danube to the Aegean Sea and encompassing vast territories which would include Macedonia and parts of Thrace. Despite Bulgaria still being under the sovereignty of the Ottomans, it was becoming widely understood as falling within the Russian sphere of influence (Yavuz and Sluglett 2011, 24, 25).

The implications of this deal were intense. For the first time, a single political entity appeared poised to dominate a lot of the central Balkans, and it was, very effectively, reshaping the region along the lines that were reflecting the strategic priorities of Russia (Jelavich 1983, 358). Smaller states, like Serbia and Montenegro, gained territory. But the sheer size of the Bulgarian arrangement overshadowed these adjustments (Jelavich 1983, 29). Concurrently, the deal made very little

effort to actually reconcile the complex ethnic, religious and regional realities of the areas it encompassed. It instead imposed a structure that was prioritizing geopolitical coherence over local diversity (Yavuz and Sluglett 2011, 432-433).

The Treaty of San Stefano was rendered unacceptable to the other European Powers because of this combination of scale and strategic alignment. Especially by the Austro-Hungarians. They viewed this birth of a large Slavic political entity in the Balkans as a direct challenge to them, to their regional position and to their internal stability. Britain, too, saw this expansion of Russian influence toward the Mediterranean with concern (Stojanović 1939, 130-131). The issue became less about whether the Ottoman Empire would lose territory; it very clearly had. It was more about who would now be in control in the political space that was now being birthed in its place.

This was the moment that was marked by the change from a crisis to an imposed ordering (Yavuz and Sluglett 2011, 126). These events have shown that the Balkans could not be controlled with the existing imperial frame anymore (Stojanović 1939, 273). Yet, the solution that they were given at San Stefano did not solve the underlying tensions. It had rephrased them in a way that was giving more privilege to one power over the others (Stojanović 1939, 233). That settlement could not stand. The question then was no longer whether the map would be redrawn again, but *how* it would be redrawn, and by *whom*.

The end of the war and the Treaty of San Stefano did not conclude the Eastern Crisis. It rather transformed it into a diplomatic confrontation between the Great Powers themselves (Yavuz and Sluglett 2011, 25,125).

The Balkans, yet again, were only the object of negotiation, only now under conditions that were formed by the war and its outcome directly. The stage had been set for a new intervention. Another one that would then try to reconcile competing interests while preserving a semblance of order. That intervention took place later that year, at the *Congress of Berlin*.

Only this time, the future of the Balkans was to be decided at the negotiating table and not on the battlefield.

4.3. The Congress of Berlin

The Congress of Berlin opened on the *13th of June 1878* (Anderson 1966, 210). It was displayed as a diplomatic gathering which was called upon to restore the order after the Russo-Turkish war. It was not a meeting of equals; it was a room in which the strongest powers of Europe came together to revise the future of territories that were predominantly inhabited by people who had no voice, or very little voice in the decision-making itself (Treaty of Berlin 1878, 401-402). The official treaty had described the purpose of the Congress as the regulation of “affairs in the East” in

the interest of the “European order”, following the war and the preliminary treaty of San Stefano (Treaty of Berlin 1878, 402). The language used here is very revealing: the Balkans were not treated primarily as a home of peoples, communities and their own political aspirations; they were treated as a problem of European management.

Otto von Bismarck, the German chancellor, was the one chairing the Congress. He was presenting Germany as a relatively “honest broker”, even though Berlin itself was now at the center of Great Power diplomacy. Sitting around the table were representatives of other major powers. For Britain, there was *Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield* and *Lord Salisbury*. Austria-Hungary was being represented by *Count Gyula Andrassy* and *Baron Haymerle*. From the Russian side, there were *Prince Gorchakov* and *Count Shuvalov*. For France, there was *William Waddington*. Italy was represented by *Count Corti*, and the Ottomans were represented by *Caratheodory Pasha*, *Mehmed Ali Pasha* and *Sadoullah Bey* (Treaty of Berlin 1878, 402-403; Anderson 1966, 210). Among these names, it is easy to notice the absence of the people most directly affected by the settlement. They were either absent or marginal. The Balkan states were not admitted as full participants. Although Serbia, Montenegro and Romania were allowed to present claims in which their interests were discussed. Their influence, however, was minimal. Bulgaria, whose fate occupied much of the Congress, did not have any real voice as Russians stood up as their spokesperson (Anderson 1966, 210). Anderson (1966, 210) had noted that the Bulgarians were “unpresented and unheard”. Even a Bosnian representative who did attempt to bring the concerns of the province to Berlin was successfully sidelined in proceedings that did not leave any formal space for local participation (Anderson 1966, 210).

This was one of the first great ironies of Berlin: a Congress that was called to settle the Balkan crisis had largely excluded the Balkan people *from settling it*.

The first and the most pressing task was the revision of *San Stefano*. The enormous Bulgaria that was created by the Russians and their settlement was alarming to everyone except Russia and Bulgarian nationalists. At Berlin, this Bulgaria was cut apart (Anderson 1966, 210). Instead of that large state that would stretch toward the Aegean and include Macedonia and Thrace, the Congress decided on a much smaller *autonomous Bulgarian principality* positioned north of the Balkan Mountains, including Sofia. South of it, *Eastern Rumelia* was made a semi-autonomous Ottoman province, was placed under a Christian governor, chosen by the Porte, but was approved by the powers. Macedonia and Thrace were included in the San Stefano arrangement, but were returned to direct Ottoman control (Jelavich and Jelavich 1977, 156). In practical terms, Berlin transformed San Stefano Bulgaria from a possible Russian-backed Balkan power to a divided and supervised political project.

This was about more than only Bulgaria. The Congress, by making Bulgaria smaller, had weakened the immediate position of Russia in the Balkans. Yet, it did not restore the Ottoman strengths, it instead redistributed influence. Stojanović (1939, 280) had argued that Berlin substituted Austrian for Russian supremacy in much of the western Balkans.

The best example for this shift is *Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Even though Bosnia and Herzegovina formally stayed under Ottoman sovereignty, Austria-Hungary was *given the right to occupy and administer* them. In the *Senjak of Novi Pazar*, the strip of territory that was separating Serbia and Montenegro, Austria-Hungary was allowed to maintain military presence (Jelavich 1983, 360; Yavuz and Sluglett 2011, 198). The importance of this decision lied in the fact that it had prevented Serbia and Montenegro from forming a direct territorial link and blocking the possibility of a bigger South Slavic consolidation in that direction. It has also moved Bosnia out of the Ottoman political world and into the Habsburg imperial sphere. Even before the formal annexation in 1908.

Article 25 of the Treaty of Berlin had given Austria-Hungary the right to "occupy and administer" Bosnia and Herzegovina, while the nominal Ottoman sovereignty was left intact (Treaty of Berlin 1878, 412). What cannot be seen in that article is any reference to the will of the population, consultation with the local authorities or any mechanisms of consent. That decision appears in the treaty as a matter of administrative arrangement. It was reduced to a legal clause that was negotiated only between the Empires. Nevertheless, on the ground, it meant the sudden reorientation of an entire province, politically, socially and economically, without any participation of the people who lived there. For Bosnia itself, this meant more than a simple diplomatic adjustment. It was a civilizational and political rupture. The province was under the Ottoman rule for centuries, its population being composed of Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Catholics and others. One account gave the approximate population of the territory at the time as 400,000 Orthodox Christians, 330,000 Muslims, 180,000 Catholics, and 10,000 others (Radušić 2011, 187). The decision that was made to hand administration to Austria-Hungary affected all communities in Bosnia, but it especially affected Bosnian Muslims. They have had close ties to Ottoman political and social structures (Babuna 2011, 198). Babuna (2011, 198) highlights that Bosnian Muslims had continued the upper layer of society under Ottoman rule and were afraid that under the Catholic Habsburg administration, they might lose their position. That they might be placed on the same level as tenants or face assimilation (Babuna 2011, 198). Hence, Berlin did not only change the administration, it destabilised social hierarchies, religious security and political identity.

The settlement also recognised, or rather, it confirmed the independence of *Serbia, Montenegro* and *Romania*. Nonetheless, the victories here were also mixed. Serbia gained *Niš, Pirot and Vranje*, which were far less than they had hoped for. Montenegro also expanded, but the gains of

it were less when compared to San Stefano. Romania gained *Dobruja* but had to give southern *Bessarabia* back to Russia (a deeply resented exchange) (Anderson 1966, 212; Jelavich and Jelavich 1977, 156). Pavlowitch (1999, 94) stated that almost everyone left Berlin disappointed. Serbia and Montenegro were kept out of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Romania was feeling betrayed by Russia, despite Russia helping them during the war. Greece was left without receiving any immediate territory. Bulgaria was, in a way, partitioned at birth after briefly imagining San Stefano as its national future (Pavlowitch 1999, 94, 113, 137).

That said, Berlin then did not satisfy Balkan nationalism. It disciplined it.

The case of Albania is another good example that most clearly shows how local populations were forced to react to decisions that were made without them. Territories inhabited by the Albanians were treated as pieces in negotiations involving Montenegro, Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and the Ottoman Empire. The *League of Prizren* was formed in June 1878, and specifically because of this. Albanians were afraid that the Congress would divide their lands among its neighbouring states. They were organizing committees, raised men and funds, sent protests to Berlin and the Porte. The Central Committee in Istanbul declared on *30 May 1878* that Albanians wanted peace with Montenegro, Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece, but instead that “Albanian land must be left to the Albanians” (Hacisalihoğlu 2011, 127). At Prizren, figures such as *Abdyl Frashëri*, *Iljaz Pasha Dibra*, *Ali Bey Gucija*, *Omer Effendi Prizreni* and *Sulejman Vokshi* helped to organise resistance to any partition of Albania (Skendi 1967, 36-37). Skendi (1967, 46) also noted that during the Congress, a “flood of protests and petitions” came from Albanians, some were against incorporation into Bulgaria, Montenegro or Greece, others were demanding autonomy within the Ottoman Empire. Regardless of this mobilisation, the Albanian position was still structurally weak. Their petitions, memoranda, and delegations did not carry the same weight as the negotiations between imperial representatives. Decisions about Albanian territories were made in Berlin, but they were not made by Albanians themselves. Bismarck reportedly dismissed the idea that an Albanian nation exists at all (Sugar and Lederer 1969, 63).

Viewed in this way, Berlin was not a neutral peace settlement. The Ottoman Empire was weakened, Russia was checked, Austria-Hungary advanced, Britain secured its wider strategic position through Cyprus, and the Balkan people were left to live with the consequences (Yavuz and Sluglett 2011, 56, 59, 127). What Berlin exposed was not only the imbalance of power, but the hierarchy of political voice: empires negotiated, states petitioned, and populations adjusted.

4.4. Two Imperial Spheres after 1878

After Berlin, the Balkans became a map of different imperial experiences. This is the paramount consequence of 1878. From that point on, people who were geographically close to one another began to live under very different systems of authority. A Bosnian Muslim landowner, a Serbian Orthodox peasant in Herzegovina, a Croatian teacher in Zagreb, a Slovenian intellectual in Ljubljana, an Albanian clan leader in the northern highlands and an Orthodox villager in Macedonia, all of them were a part of the bigger Balkan world. Yet, the states and institutions around them did not work in the same way. The region was being divided by more than borders. It was being divided by administration, law, education, taxation, religion and the experience or power on a daily basis.

One of the prime examples of the new Austro-Hungarian sphere was *Bosnia and Herzegovina*. After the occupation in 1878, Bosnia has formally stayed under the Ottoman sovereignty, but, in practice, it was governed by Austria-Hungary. The transfer was not peaceful. Muslim Fighters were resisting the occupation and Pavlowitch (1999, 116) noted that they even received and accepted support from part of the Serb population that did not wish to exchange the rule of the Ottomans for the one of the Habsburgs. Resistance had continued in different forms. A Serb-led and Muslim-supported rebellion broke out in Herzegovina in 1879, and the introduction of conscription in 1881 had provoked a larger revolt that was only suppressed in 1882 (Pavlowitch 1999, 116). This example is important because it showcases that the rule of the Habsburgs did not simply “modernise” Bosnia from above. It had to first conquer, pacify, classify and administer it.

Once that the occupation was secured, Bosnia and Herzegovina was placed under the *Joint Ministry of Finance* in Vienna, and governed through a centralised administration. Especially during the long tenure of *Benjamin Kállay* from 1882 to 1903 (Pavlowitch 1999, 117). Kállay’s rule is used as an example here because it is showing what the control of Austria-Hungary meant in practice. It was efficient, it was bureaucratic, and it was modernising, but it also was very controlling. The administration had introduced a stronger civil service, it had developed infrastructure, expanded railways, encouraged exploitation of timber and mineral resources, and it had brought Bosnia more tightly into the economic and political structures of the monarchy (Pavlowitch 1999, 117; Jevlich and Jelavich 1977, 255, 257). However, this modernisation was not neutral. Jelavich (1983, 60-61) had noted that local taxes were sharply on the rise under Kállay, with estimates that are suggesting that individual tax burdens had increased fivefold even, while the roads and railways were mostly built according to military needs and Hungarian economic interests, rather than for the needs of the local peasants.

For ordinary people, then, Habsburg rule carried order *and* pressure. It had given Bosnia a more systemic administration, but it has also made the state present in everyday life. The government had built schools, it had supervised religious institutions, monitored political activity and used education as a tool for integration. In 1879 in Sarajevo, they have built the first gymnasium and following that, other state-sponsored schools followed across the province. These schools were also used as instruments of surveillance. Hajdarpasić (2015, 135) shows that the Austro-Hungarian officials were particularly suspicious of youth politics, Serbian nationalist activism and organisations that were inspired by the *United Serbian Youth (Omladina)*. Confessional schools, be it Muslim, Orthodox, Catholic or Jewish, none of them was abolished. However, they were put under the supervision of the state. Especially when regarding teachers and curricula (Hajdarpasić 2015, 136). To put it simply, education was not only about literacy, it was also about loyalty.

This could have also been seen in religion. Under the rule of the Ottomans, religious communities were enjoying a significant amount of autonomy through older confessional structures. When looking at that under the Austria-Hungary, those communities were reorganised and regulated. A Catholic hierarchy was established in Sarajevo. Its appointed archbishop was *Josip Stadler* in 1882, and was partly replacing the older Franciscan influence with a structure that was more compatible with the interests of the Habsburg state (Pavlowitch 1999, 117.). Turning then to the Orthodox hierarchy, it too was regulated through arrangements with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Muslims, on the other hand, had obtained their own institutional structures for religious and educational foundations. However, even this recognition came with supervision (Pavlowitch 1999, 117). Ergo, religious autonomy did exist, but under the shadow of the state.

Kállay had also tried to control the national question of Bosnia. The population in 1879 was roughly *43 percent Orthodox, 39 percent Muslim and 18 percent Catholic* (Pavlowitch 1999, 117). Both Serb and Croat national movements were claiming the Slavic-speaking Muslims, because whomever was to win them, they would then be able to claim a majority in Bosnia. Kállay had tried to block both, Serbian and Croatian influence by promoting a separate *Bosnian identity* and was even spreading the idea of a “Bosnian” language (Pavlowitch 1999, 117). This was not romantic multiculturalism. It was the strategy of the Empire. Its goal was to insulate Bosnia from Serbian and Croatian nationalism and, with it, keep them loyal to the monarchy.

This transition was quite tough for the Bosnian Muslims, for under the Ottoman rule, many of them had enjoyed privileged positions as landowners, urban craftsmen, administrators or members of the religious elite. And all of a sudden, they found themselves to be led by a European empire that is not Muslim. Many have even emigrated to other Ottoman territories. Pavlowitch

(1999, 117-118) estimates that perhaps *100,000 to 140,000 Muslims* had left Bosnia and Herzegovina before 1910. The ones that stayed, they had to adapt. Some of that Muslim elite had gradually learned how to work within Habsburg Institutions. Although Muslim craftsmen and artisans were hit hard by competition from cheaper goods that were imported from the monarchy, the old guild-based economy was struggling against capitalist integration (Babuna 2011, 207). Concurrently, the agrarian structure had stayed primarily untouched. In 1878, about *85,000 sharecropping peasant families*, mostly Orthodox, had worked on *6,000-7,000 estates owned by Muslims* (Pavlowitch 1999, 117-118). Hence, Habsburg rule did modernise administration, but it did not immediately solve rural inequality.

Coming to Croatia and Slovenia, they belonged to the Habsburg world in a different way (Greenberg 2010, 365). The occupation of those two countries was not as new as the Bosnian was. They had long been inside the monarchy. Looking through the lens of those two, it can be seen just how disjointed the South Slavic experience actually was. The Slovene lands, *Carniola, Carinthia and Styria*, they had belonged to the Austrian half of the empire, whereas *Civil Croatia and Slovenia* were belonging to the Hungarian Kingdom. *Dalmatia* was in the Austrian half. It was administratively disconnected from Croatia, and the *Military Frontier* persisted as a special border zone until its final integration in 1881 (Greenberg 2010, 364-365; Pavlowitch 1999, 43, 98, 101). What this means is that even among Habsburg South Slavs, there was no single experience. A Croat in Zagreb, a Dalmatian in Split and a Slovene in Ljubljana were not led through identical bodies (Greenberg 2010, 365).

This difference was important for the identity formation. Croatian national politics were developed, in part, as a response to Hungarian pressure. Especially language policy and the fear of Magyarization. The *Illyrian movement*, which was led by *Ljudevit Gaj* from the 1830s, tried to create a wider South Slavic cultural identity through language (Greenberg 2010, 364-366, 378). But by 1848, it had progressively become tied to the political concerns of Croatia. It was successful in merging Croatian identity across Civil Croatia, Slavonia, Dalmatia, Istria and part of the Military Frontier. However, it had failed to integrate the Slovene lands, where the identity was consolidated around Carniola and figures such as *France Prešern* (Greenberg 2010, 365, 376). Thus, even under one empire, South Slavic identity was not unified.

The Ottoman sphere after 1878 looked very different. The empire kept its control over parts of *Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, Thrace and other remaining European territories*, but its authority had grown weaker; it was not as even, and it was depending, more and more, on local intermediaries. The rule of the Ottomans was arranged around religious community, distinguished local power and administrative reform that usually existed, more distinctly, on paper than in

practice. The *millet system* was organising people predominantly by their religious affiliation. Orthodox Christians under the Patriarchate, Catholics, Jews, Muslims and later other recognised communities. This had allowed for communal autonomy, primarily in family law, education and religious affairs. However, this did not mean equality. Muslims were still the ones more privileged in political and military structures, while the Christians were tolerated, but were still subordinate (Jelavich and Jelavich 1977, 4-5, 13, 16, 25, 171, 207).

At the municipal level, the leadership of the Ottomans had worked through the use of intermediaries. Village leaders who were known by the titles of *knez*, *chorbaji*, *kodza-bashi* or *hodja-bashi*, depending on the region, were collecting taxes, represented their communities and mediated between peasants and officials. The nobles of the Muslims, also known as *ayans*, were usually in control of the land, of the armed retainers, tax collection and of keeping the order (Jelavich and Jelavich 1977, 4, 7, 13, 16; Stavrianos 1958, 224, 384). This had made the rule of the Ottomans flexible, but also irregular and very exploitive. In a lot of areas, especially in the ones where the *chiflik* system had grown, peasants had become sharecroppers under very heavy obligations. Stavrianos (1958, 141) had described the tenants of the *chifliks* as being left with only around a third of their produce after state taxes, seed, landlord claims, and intermediaries' fees have been reduced. Thus, in theory, peasants were not legally serfs, but in practice, debt and dependence could bind them to estates.

The Ottoman reforms of the nineteenth century had tried to change this. The *Tanzimat reforms* which were renewed after 1856, they made a promise of equality between Muslims and the ones who were not Muslim. They have recognised millets between 1862 and 1868, they have also introduced secular elite schools, enacted the *Land Code of 1858* and modifications in 1872 (Pavlowitch 1999, 101; Kodaman 2011, 383). Those reforms were not satisfying almost anyone. The Muslim elites thought of this as a threat to the privileges that they still had left (Pavlowitch 1999, 102). The Christian elite had usually used them to push their national agenda. The peasants were still left to suffer from taxation, insecurity and local abuse. After what had happened in 1877-1878 and its disasters, *Abdülhamid II* moved to stronger centralisation, toward suspending parliamentary life, and he had also tried to hold the empire together through autocracy, bureaucracy and Islamic unity (Kodaman 2011, 383-385).

The Ottoman control was also seen in the territories that were inhabited by Albanians. Albanians were separated across several vilayets: *Shkodër/Scutari*, *Kosovo*, *Janina* and *Monastir/Bitola* (Pavlowitch 1999, 103). They were not united under one administrative unit. The clans in the Northern highlands kept their customary authority strong. In Scutari, the population was mostly Albanian, but it was not uniformly Muslim. Kosovo, too, included a large Albanian population

alongside Slavs and others. The ones that were even more complex were the Janina and Monastir. They had Albanians, Greeks, Slavs, Vlachs, Muslims, Orthodox Christians and Catholics living under those overlapping political, religious and also linguistic influences (Pavlowitch 1999, 103, 147, 168, 170). Some of the clan leaders and local families were ruling their regions with very little interfering, while the towns still were connected to the Ottoman, Greek, Catholic and commercial networks.

The difference with the Habsburg Bosnia can also be seen through the education. In Bosnia, Austro-Hungarians have built schools so that they could integrate the populations into their imperial structure (Hajderpašić 2015, 136). However, education in Albanian lands was still divided by religion. Muslim children were attending Turkish-Islamic schools, Orthodox children went to Greek schools, and the Catholic children were mostly attending the Italian language schools with some Albanian instruction (Jelavich and Jelavich 1977, 126, 227). Jelavich (1983, 85) had noted that in 1878, in the somewhat advanced senjaks of *Gjirokastër*, *Berat*, and *Vlorë*, there were 80 Turkish schools and 163 Greek schools, but none of them was teaching in Albanian. The first Albanian private school that was officially authorised had opened in *Korçë* in 1887. Although it was later closed by the Ottoman officials in 1902 (Jelavich 1983, 86). Here can be seen that the religious skeleton had blocked the progress of a unified national education space.

Now, this was the real result of the imperial divide after Berlin. The two empires delivered different elements, but reached similar results. Austria-Hungary gave bureaucracy, railways, schools, police, tax efficiency and state supervision. It has made the society more legible to the state. Despite all of those perks, it had also dealt with Bosnia as a governed object, watched schools, managed its religion, raised their taxes and tried to persuade their loyalty from above. Conversely, the Ottoman Empire gave them more local and communal autonomy, especially through religion, notables, clans and village structure. However, their autonomy was followed by inequality, the weak protection of the state, irregular taxation, insecure land relations and educational shattering.

Neither one of the two empires or their systems simply “gave” the Balkans modernity or backwardness. They were both making order and disorder, but in different forms. For the people of the Balkans, these differences were not abstract.

Those people, they have lived through the school one had attended, the tax one had paid, the court one had to face, the language one had to learn, the army one had to serve, the church or mosque one belonged to and the official who appeared at the village gate. Precisely this is why the events after the divide in 1878 mattered so much. Long before Yugoslavia, this region was already being trained into different political habits.

4.5. National Awakenings

National Awakenings in the Balkans at the time did not come out of one single moment (Stavrianos 1958, 222). They did not move through the region in one single rhythm (Stavrianos 1958, 222). They happened inconsistently through different means: books, schools, church disputes, language reforms, newspapers, secret societies, armed bands and exile communities (Jelavich 1983, 10, 57, 85, 110). In the end, it all escalated into a war. These movements were connected with primarily one thing: urgency. The nineteenth century was coming to an end, and people across the region were waking up and finally understanding that their survival depended on them being politically named, culturally organised, and recognised by the international community. In the Balkans, at the time, it was dangerous to be undefined. If those people would not speak for themselves, somebody else would: an empire, a church, a neighbouring state or a Great Power (Anderson 1966, 210).

Among the South Slaves, one of the earliest, and also one of the most ambitious attempts to even imagine a bigger collective future came from the *Illyrian movement* in Croatia. The Illyrian movement was led by *Ljudevit Gaj* in the 1830s and 1840s. The goal of the movement was to create a wider South Slavic cultural unity through the prism of language, literature and historical memory. To say that it was only about poetry or literature or even grammar would be too simple. That was a political and cultural project that was born in the Habsburg world (Jelavich 1983, 305-307). In that world, Croats were faced with the pressure of the Hungarian political dominance, and in it, the language had also become a weapon of survival. Gaj and his circle were promoting a standardised literary language that was based on *Štokavian*. Štokavian was a dialect that had the potential to connect Croats, Serbs, Bosnians and Montenegrins. His alphabetic reforms have left a lasting imprint: the Latin South Slavic script that is associated with him, the *gajica*, has become one of the major linguistic legacies of the movement (Greenberg 2010, 366-367, 378-379,).

Illyrism, however, showed the limits of South Slavic unity before it even began. Serbs in the Principality of Serbia and in Vojvodina were not so easily drawn into a movement they usually saw as Catholic and too closely connected to Croatia (Banac 1984, 78-79). Serbs had their own linguistic revolution already underway through *Vuk Stefanović Karadžić* (Banac 1984, 80-81). From 1815, Vuk Stefanović Karadžić had promoted a Serbian standard that was based on the speech of the ordinary people and written in a reformed Cyrillic alphabet. He had a well known idea, that all those who spoke Štokavian were Serbs directly, and that right there collided with Illyrian efforts to present the same linguistic space as a basis for wider Slavic unity (Banac 1984, 80-81). Croatian Illyrians were challenging Karadžić throughout history and law (Greenberg 2010, 370). Concurrently, figures such as Bogoslav Šulek, who was the editor of the Illyrian newspaper

Branislav, have rejected the equation of Štokavian speech with Serbian nationality (Greenberg 2010, 370).

Montenegro was standing partly aside as well (Greenberg 2010, 370). *Petar Petrović Njegoš*, prince-bishop and poet, was sympathetic with that South Slavic unity, but Montenegrin literati generally thought of the Illyrian name and that Catholic-Latin framework as foreign when compared to their own Orthodox and heroic tradition. Slovenes, even though they were Catholic too and with that less suspicious than the Serbs, did not really merge into the Illyrian project. Some of the Slovene clerics and intellectuals in Carinthia and Styria did indeed show interest; however, the identity of the Slovenes unified around Carniola, Ljubljana and figures like France Prešern, rather than around Zagreb. So, the Illyrian movement was a brilliant success for a national revival for Croatia and a step toward later Yugoslavia, but it did not succeed in its intent to complete South Slavic unification (Greenberg 2010, 364, 370-372, 378).

Serbian national development was on a different path as Serbia had something that most of the other South Slavs did not: an autonomous state that was created after the uprisings of the early years of the nineteenth century (Jelavich and Jelavich 1977, 36-37, 53). The Serbian Revolution 1804-1817 gave Serbia a political ground which was later able to sprout cultural and territorial ambitions (Jelavich and Jelavich 1977, 37). By the middle of the nineteenth century, this ambition of theirs was articulated in *Ilija Garašanin's Načertanije* of 1844. It was written while he was serving as a minister of internal affairs (Jelavich and Jelavich 1977, 63). The text did not imagine Serbia as a small principality that should stay within the borders that it was existing in at the time, rather as the centre of a wider national mission. The text had argued that Serbia had to attach itself to its neighbouring Serbian peoples, and that it had to place itself among those European states with a plan for the future (Učan 2023, 227, 231).

This state-centred vision of Serbia mattered also for Bosnia and Macedonia. In Bosnia, the national awakening of its people did not simply arrive from Belgrade or Zagreb, yet it was not isolated either. Hajderpašić (2015, 8-9) shows that since the 1804s, Serbian and Croatian patriots looked at Bosnia, more and more, as a land that needed awakening. Croatian activists were staking claim on Bosnia through language, folklore and historical ties. Concurrently, Serbian nation-builders were claiming Bosnia through Orthodox identity, also language and their own expanding image of Serbia. With that, Bosnia became a space where the same people could be imagined as Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, Muslim and later Yugoslav, depending who was speaking on it, and from where (Hajderpašić 2015, 9-11).

Again, this was not abstract. Even the Bosnian intellectuals were participating in these currents. *Ivan Franjo Jukić* was a Bosnian Franciscan who was born in 1818. He became one of the first

major figures to write about Bosnia and in a modern national register. While he was studying in Hungary, he had encountered Illyrian and Serbian national ideals, he had also admired Vuk Karadžić and had tried to produce new knowledge about Bosnia itself. However, this work was dangerous. In 1852, *Omer Pasha Latas*, who was the Ottoman reformist governor, first cultivated and then punished him. Jukić was then thrown in jail and permanently expelled from Bosnia. His story is an example of the double nature of those awakenings. They did open intellectual horizons, but they had also opened the door to repression (Hajderpašić 2015, 39-40).

The Bulgarian awakening was developing through a combination of education, church struggle and revolutionary organisation. Schools here were essential. The *Gabrovo school*, which was organised on modern lines, had become a milestone because it had trained pupils and teachers in Bulgarian, and it helped to weaken the cultural dominance of the Greeks. Then the struggle moved into the church. For many Bulgarians, the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which was dominated by the Greeks, was not only a religious authority to them. It had also represented a national obstacle. The demand for Bulgarian bishops and church taxes turned into a demand for their own national church. In 1870, the Ottoman government had issued a firman establishing the *Bulgarian Exarchate* and its Article X let new dioceses to join if two-thirds of their population voted for it. This made the Exarchate more than a church. It made a national map in formation (Stavrianos 1958, 366-367, 371-375).

The Exarchate represented a huge victory, but it also made the rivalries in the Balkans that much sharper. Once the Bulgarian church began to grow, primarily towards Macedonia, Greeks and later Serbia saw that it was a threat. The Patriarchate declared the Exarchate schismatic in 1872, and the church dispute turned into a political fight over schools, bishops and loyalties of populations (Stavrianos 1958, 375). In other words, Macedonia did not become contested only through armies. Firstly, it was contested through classrooms, dioceses, priests, teachers and village identity. Stavrianos (1958, 375) was very clear that the Exarchate gave Bulgarian nationalism a “solid foundation” for statehood and that it had a direct effect on the Macedonian question that would dominate Balkan politics for decades to come.

Macedonia, by the 1890s, had become the most dangerous meeting point of the Balkan national project (Jelavich 1983, 93). Bulgarian, Serbian and Greek organisations were competing for influence, once again, through schools, propaganda, churches and armed bands. The Bulgarians founded the *Cyril and Methodius Society* in 1884. The Serbs followed that with the *Society of St. Sava* in 1886. The Greeks were working on making the Hellenic influence that much stronger. However, that cultural work had a way to violence (Jelavich 1983, 93). The *Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation*, which was founded in Thessaloniki in 1893, was led by men such as

Daiman Gruev and *Gotse Delchev*. Both of them were connected to the Exarchate world. The slogan of it was, “Macedonia for the Macedonians”, which could have meant autonomy, future union with Bulgaria or even a Balkan federation. It all depended on the faction (Jelavich 1983, 93). By the turn of the century, Macedonia had become full of armed bands that were attacking Ottoman forces and rival national organisations alike (Sugar 1969, 130).

The *Ilinden Uprising* that happened in August of 1903 was the dramatic expression of this revolutionary world. The hopes of IMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation) were to either free Macedonia or at least to provoke any intervention from the outside. The uprising was successful in parts of the Bitola vilayet, but only briefly. By December, it was crushed by the Ottoman army. Gotse Delchev had already been captured and executed before the revolt had even begun. After this failure, IMRO had split into rival factions. Despite that, the uprising still mattered because it was showing that Macedonia could no longer be treated as an ordinary Ottoman province. It became a battlefield of competing national futures (Jelavich 1983, 94-95).

The awakening of the Albanians came later and under much harder conditions. Compared to Serbs, for example, Albanians did not have an autonomous state, and when compared to the Bulgarians, they did not have a single national church. Compared to Croats and Slovenes, they did not have a unified administrative or educational centre within the Habsburg world. Albanian-speaking communities were divided among the vilayets of *Shkodër*, *Kosovo*, *Monastir/Bitola*, and *Janina*. They were also divided by religion: Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox. This had made the language the most important bond. However, even language did not have a standardised literary form or agreed alphabet (Jelavich and Jelavich 1977, 222-229).

In 1878, they formed the *League of Prizren* (Jelavich and Jelavich 1977, 224). Therefore, it was not yet a movement of independence in the full modern sense. It had started off as a defensive response to the threat that was upon them at the time. That Threat was that their land would be divided among Serbia, Montenegro, Greece and Bulgaria after Berlin. However, between 1878 and 1881, the movement had managed to achieve something lasting. It had brought the northern and southern Albanian leaders into communication. It had created a common language of territorial defence and also created the first concrete step towards an Albanian political program. When those autonomists had managed to gain control of the League by 1880, the response of the Ottomans was force. In April 1881, Sultan Abdülhamid II had sent *Dervish Pasha* to crush Prizren and suppress those autonomous movements (Jelavich 1977, 223-225).

Albanians were defeated there, and right after, they have turned their activism into culture. In 1879, Albanian intellectuals in Constantinople founded the *Society for the Printing of Albanian Writing*. It was led by figures that included *Sami Frashëri* and his brother *Naim Frashëri*, who

was later remembered as the great poet of Albanian nationalism. They later prepared school texts and helped to turn the language into a national cause. The point of the society was books, newspapers, journals and translations in Albanian. Its constitution plainly stated that nations without language lived in darkness, and Albanians, who were, at the time, lacking words in their language, were in that same condition (Jelavich and Jelavich 1977, 225-226, 282). How political this cultural work actually was, can be seen in the struggle over the alphabet alone. Each of the scripts, be it Latin, Cyrillic or Arabic, implied a different orientation. The *Congress of Bitola/Monastir in November 1908* took the Latin alphabet. However, this had provoked resistance. Especially among some of the Muslims who had a preference for the “script of the Koran”. The Young Turk government saw this and also understood the danger of this. In *March of 1910*, the Grand Vizir had warned that the wish to adopt Latin characters was the first step in the direction of separation from Türkiye, and he had also declared that the government would do everything to stop it (Jelavich and Jelavich 1977, 226).

The Young Turk Revolution of 1908 seemed quite promising to Albanians, at first, because it had offered them constitutionalism and representation (Stavrianos 1958, 508). Countless Albanians joined the Committee of Union and Progress. Especially in *Salonica, Monastir, Resna, Ohrid, Struga, , Gjirokastër, Shkodër, Üsküb/Skopje, Mitrovica, and Prizren* (Skendi 1967, 338). However, the Ottomanisation and centralisation broke down the relationship and replaced their promises of equality (Skendi 1967, 365). They have closed the Albanian schools, suppressed their newspapers, nationalists' arrests were blooming, and even the words “Albania” and “Albanians” were, reportedly, prohibited in print after the revolt in 1910 (Stavrianos 1958, 509). When the minister of interior, in the Ottoman assembly, denied the existence of Albanian nationality, Albanian deputies shouted back: “Var, Effendim, var!” – “There is, Sir, there is!” (Stavrianos 1958, 509).

Those Albanian revolts of 1910, 1911 and 1912 had finished their transition from cultural awakening to political mobilisation. Even the Kosovo highlanders stood up against taxation, conscription and Ottomanisation in 1910. Catholic highlanders had revolted in 1911, and by August, the Porte had granted concessions, including amnesty. Albanian schools were granted the right to carry weapons and European-only service for Albanian recruits. Hasan Prishtina, in 1912, had warned that dissatisfaction with Young Turk rule was spreading and that leaders in Kosovo were now working with other Albanian regions in the making of a much bigger, general uprising. That revolt had made the Albanian question visible to the outside world in the same way that the Balkan states were preparing for war against the Ottoman Empire (Skendi 1967, 392, 405, 411, 419, 425-427, 445).

What these awakenings were directly leading to was the Balkan wars. Macedonia was being torn apart by rival armed movements. Albanians were afraid of being parted. Serbia had its ambitions set on the Adriatic. Bulgarians had their eyes on Macedonia and Thrace. Greece was after Thessaloniki, Epirus and Crete. Montenegro was on the move against Shkodër.

In *March 1912*, Serbia and Bulgaria signed their alliance, but with a secret annex that was dividing Macedonia into Serbian, Bulgarian and contested zones. In *May 1912*, Greece and Bulgaria signed their pact. In *October 1912*, Montenegro and Serbia made their alliance formal. And on the *8th of October 1912*, Montenegro opened hostilities against the Ottoman Empire (Jelavich 1983, 97).

The awakenings, or rather, the projects of these countries, have matured enough to challenge the rule of the Ottomans; however, they have not matured enough to be able to coexist peacefully. The victories that they managed to accomplish over empires, therefore, immediately became conflicts between themselves.

4.6. The Balkan Wars

By 1912, exhaustion and delay were the only things that were keeping the Ottoman Empire's European possessions. That and the inability of its neighbours to agree and decide on how the territories that were left should be divided among them.

In *October of 1908*, Bosnia was annexed (Jelavich and Jelavich 1977, 176). Serbia was not happy with that move, as Bosnia had remained a part of the imagined national future of Serbia, as long as it was formally Ottoman, even under the occupation of the Habsburgs (Jelavich and Jelavich 1977, 216). Once it was annexed by Austria-Hungary outright, that possibility seemed to have disappeared. Serbia was furious (Jelavich and Jelavich 1977, 258-259). Their leaders and newspapers were calling for resistance, while Russia, which was still weak after the defeat by Japan and the revolution in 1905, was forced to retreat under the pressure of the Germans (Jelavich 1983, 96). This outcome, as explained by Jelavich and Jelavich (1977, 216), was very humiliating for both Serbia and Russia. This humiliation later pushed Russians to rebuild their Balkans position by encouraging cooperation between the Balkan states themselves, all the while Serbia was on the lookout for expansion elsewhere, especially in the Macedonian and Adriatic direction (Jelavich and Jelavich 1977, 210, 216-217, 232).

The war that followed stopped being about only the hatred of the Ottoman Empire. It started being, amongst many other reasons, about blocked ambitions. Serbia was shut out of Bosnia (Jelavich 1983, 96). Bulgaria, Greece and Montenegro had their own ambitions that did not seem close to reaching, and the Albanian fright of partition fueled the fire more and more each passing

day (Anderson 1966, 288, 291). In the *Italo-Turkish War of 1911-1912*, where the Ottomans were defeated, and with it lost Tripoli and Cyrenaica and left Italy holding the Dodecanese, the important window for the Balkans opened (Jelavich 1983, 84, 97). In it, they saw that the moment had arrived. The empire was looking more vulnerable than ever before, Macedonia looked available, and diplomacy started to move much faster than reform (Anderson 1966, 291).

This all gave birth to the Balkan League. However, the League was not created through trust, it was created through calculation (Anderson 1966, 291). On the *13th of March*, Serbia and Bulgaria signed an alliance (Anderson 1966, 291). In the eyes of the public, that alliance was defensive. However, in secret, the alliance was including the partitioning of Macedonia (Jelavich and Jelavich 1977, 217). Serbia was to gain lands north of the Šar Mountains, and Bulgaria was to gain the east of the Struma and Rhodope region (Jelavich and Jelavich 1977, 217). The disputed central zone was to be referred to the Russian tsar, that is if the allies could not agree (Anderson 1966, 291). The problem was already built into the treaty. Both Serbia and Bulgaria wanted Macedonia and both of them were imagining future victory differently. Bulgaria was expecting autonomy as a step toward eventual union and Serbia was rejecting autonomy and wanted direct partition. Especially because it was afraid of Austria-Hungary more than it was of the Ottomans (Jelavich and Jelavich 1977, 216-217).

The coalition grew quickly (Anderson 1966, 292). In *May 1912*, Bulgaria and Greece signed their own pact. Although that one did not have any precise territorial clauses (Jelavich 1983, 97). Montenegro concluded its agreements with Serbia and Bulgaria in *October*. Russia played a role in helping to push those countries closer to cooperation (Jelavich 1983, 97). The Russians were hoping that the League would serve them as a barrier against Austria-Hungary (Anderson 1966, 291). However, they did not have the full control of what exactly they had encouraged. Speaking for the Great Powers, Austria-Hungary and Russia had given a warning to the Balkan states on the *8th of October*, telling them to not disturb the peace. The warning was too late. At the same time, Montenegro had attacked the Ottoman Empire. That attack was soon followed by Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece. This was the first time that these countries came together to fight the Ottoman Empire (Jelavich 1983, 97).

The collapse of the Ottomans was surprisingly rapid. The Balkan armies had roughly *700,000 men*, while the Ottoman armies had around *320,000*. They were also suffering from political instability, lack of funds and inadequate equipment. The navy of the Greeks was in control of the seas, which was preventing the Ottoman forces from being transferred from Anatolia to Macedonia. Bulgaria was carrying much of the heavy fighting in Thrace while facing the main Ottoman army. Serbia and Greece were advancing through Macedonian and Albanian lands. Montenegro

managed to besiege Shkodër, Greece was pushing towards Janina and both Bulgaria, and they were racing for Thessaloniki. On the 8th of November, the Greeks were the first ones to arrive, and with it, deprive Bulgaria of the great Macedonian city it wanted so desperately (Jelavich 1983, 97-98).

The spring of 1913 came, and the Ottoman rule had essentially collapsed. The time came for the Great Powers to intervene once again, and that brought the *Treaty of London* in May 1913. That Treaty had reduced the Ottoman Empire to Constantinople and a small surrounding strip along the Enos-Midia line. Once it was signed, Bulgaria received Adrianople, and Crete was finally given to Greece. However, the treaty did not solve the burning question of that time: Macedonia. The league had finally defeated the Ottomans, but that victory also brought the rivalries that had been hidden under the language of liberation (Jelavich 1983, 99).

Albanian leaders, at first, tried to remain neutral. However, the fast collapse of the Ottoman Empire made that neutrality almost impossible. By that time, the Balkan armies had already occupied Albanian territories and the gander of partition became that much greater. Ismail Qemal had travelled from Constantinople to Romania, then to Vienna where he met Foreign Minister *Leopold von Berchtold* and British and Italian representatives, before he had returned through Trieste and Durrës to Vlorë (Jelavich 1983, 100). On the 28th of November, there was an assembly held that had consisted of *eighty three Muslim and Christian delegates* from Albanian regions and they have declared Albanian independence in Vlorë. Qemal was at the head of the provisional government (Skendi 1967, 463). However, not even this act gave Albanians control over their own fate. The Great Powers met in London, under *Sir Edward Grey*, and have refused to recognise Qemal's government directly. They have then instead created an *International Control Commission*. Under it, the gendarmerie was placed under the command of the Deutch. Albania was made independent in July 1913, but the borders of it were still excluding large Albanian-majority areas, most importantly Kosovo (Jelavich 1983, 101).

The Second Balkan War began almost immediately after the first one ended. Now, Serbia and Greece were denying some of their expected gains in Albania, because Austria-Hungary and Italy were in support of an Albanian state as a barrier to Slavic expansion. They looked to Macedonia for compensation (Jelavich 1983, 99). Bulgaria, while being isolated and convinced of its own military capabilities, attacked Serbia and Greece on the night of 29-30 June 1913 (Jelavich and Jelavich 1977, 220-221). That was a disastrous decision (Jelavich 1983, 99). Unexpectedly, the war was joined by Montenegro, Romania and the Ottoman Empire *against* Bulgaria. By July 31st, Bulgaria had signed an armistice, and the Treaty of Bucharest of the 10th of August 1913, had confirmed their defeat (Jelavich and Jelavich 1977, 221).

This settlement, once again, drew the peninsula anew. Serbia had almost doubled in size, Greece had gotten southern Macedonia, Janina and had also expanded eastward beyond Kavalla. Serbia and Montenegro had also divided the Sanjak of Novi Pazar and, with it, finally obtained a common border. Romania took southern Dobruja, the Ottoman Empire got back Adrianople and a part of eastern Thrace, and the Bulgarians had only kept a part of eastern Macedonia and an Aegean outlet at *Dedeagatchu/Alexandroupolis*. Therefore, these wars had completed the removal of the Ottoman power from almost all of Europe. Concurrently, they did not produce peace. The cost of human lives and political bitterness was tremendous. Pavlowitch (1999, 199-200) had written that all participants in Macedonia were looking to not only gain territory back, but also to remove, assimilate or even weaken the rival ethnic groups. Villages and quarters were destroyed, civilians were killed, extortions were practised and forced assimilation attempted. The victors were now faced with the task of absorbing heterogeneous populations, which included Muslims and Orthodox Christians whose national consciousness was often unclear or divided (Pavlowitch 1999, 199-200).

These wars hardened Europe's view of the Balkans. Violence, irregular warfare, changing alliances, assassinations and diplomatic crises fed into that older habit of the West of treating south-eastern Europe as unstable, confusing and almost naturally violent. Fleming (2000, 1218-1219, 226) wrote how Western literary and political representation usually turned the Balkans into interchangeable spaces of mystery, danger and chronic disorder. In it, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Syldavia, Herzoslovakia, and other imagined or real names blurred into one another (Fleming 2000, 1218-1219, 226). Those stereotypes were easy to fall into once the 1912-1913 had happened. Those wars seemed to confirm them. Concurrently, this conception was misleading. The instability that they were seeing was not simply "Balkan Character". That was what came out of the collapsing empire: the interference of those Great Powers, overlapping populations, national projects that were left unfinished and borders that were repeatedly redrawn against the grain of local life.

By the time Europe had moved into war in 1914, the Balkans were no longer an Ottoman question on the periphery. They had become one of the most dangerous fault lines of the entire European order.

4.7. 1918: a Transition, not an Ending

The Balkans did not reach a conclusion by 1918. That year represented yet another threshold for them. The First World War had destroyed the two imperial structures that had been shaping the Balkans for centuries before (Jelavich 1983, 133). The Ottoman Empire had already been pushed

entirely out of Europe, and the Habsburg Monarchy had finally released Croatia, Slovenia, Dalmatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Vojvodina and other South Slav lands into a political vacuum (Jelavich 1983, 121; Pavlowirch 1999, 223-224). At first glance, this was liberation. However, on the second glance, panic ensued. The borders were not clear, armies were on the move, Italy was taking its steps towards the territories that were promised to it during the war, peasants were hurrying to get land and local councils were trying to create authority faster than disorder could spread (Stavrianos 1958, 569, 571, 574, 593; Pavlowitch 1999, 223-224).

The South Slav solution was quick. During the war, émigré politicians like *Ante Trumbić* and Frano Supilo have worked through the *Yugoslav Committee* in London (Jelavich 1983, 124). Concurrently, the Serbian government, which was under Nikola Pašić, was slowly but surely moving from a primarily Serbian program toward the idea of a bigger South Slav unification (Jelavich 1983, 123, 143). The *Corfu Declaration* that was signed in 1917 committed the Serbian government and the Yugoslav Committee to a future state of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes under the Karađorđević dynasty (Stavrianos 1958, 575, 618). However, there was a question to be answered: whether that state would be centralised or federal (Jelavich 1983, 146). What this meant is that the unity was proclaimed before the political meaning of it was agreed upon.

When Austria-Hungary began to fall apart in October 1918, South Slav leaders in Zagreb formed the *National Council of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs*. On the 29th of October 1918, they had proclaimed the lands of the South Slavs as independent from Habsburg rule. Yet, that independence alone was fragile. The council was lacking some of the crucial parts. It was lacking an army, they were still afraid of the possible Italian occupation, and they were faced with social unrest at home, all simultaneously (Pavlowitch 1999, 222-223). Pavlowitch (1999, 223) had noted that, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the collapse of authority produced ethnic violence. That included revenge attacks by the Serb peasant part, against Muslims who were associated with Austro-Hungarian structures during the war. In this atmosphere, even Zagreb had to call for the appearance of Serbian military forces (Pavlowitch 1999, 223). Therefore, the union with Serbia was more than just an ideological act. It was also a stronger attempt to secure the order, territory, and international recognition.

Prince Regent, *Alexandar*, on the 1st of December 1918, proclaimed in Belgrade the *Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes* (Jelavich 1983, 125, 147). This new state was not just simply created by Versailles (Pavlowitch 1999, 226). It had existed before the Paris Peace Conference had opened, through the actions of Serbia, Zagreb National Council, revolutionary organisations in Vojvodina and the Montenegrin assembly that deposed King *Nicholas Petrović Njegoš*, who voted for the union with Serbia (Pavlowitch 1999, 223). The speed at which they were going, however, was

hiding its own fractures. The state in which Serbia had entered this new kingdom was with a monarchy, army, administration and political parties that were created through its own state-building experience (Pavlowitch 1999, 258). The background of Croatia and Slovenia was that of the Habsburg world. In it, the political life was developed through provincial rights, legal autonomy and parliamentary struggle (Pavlowitch 1999, 258). Bosnia's place was somewhere in the middle of these traditions. Bosnia, with its Orthodox, Muslim and Catholic communities, was shaped by both the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian legacies (Pavlowitch 1999, 117).

This is why 1918 should be looked at and understood as a transition, rather than an ending. The new, Yugoslav state had put together people who had been imagined as related, even as one "South Slav" community. A community that had lived through different institutions, different legal systems, educational structures and political expectations. As Sugar and Leder (1969, 397) had noted, even the term "*Yugoslav*", in 1918, existed partly as a way to soften the divisions among Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and not really as evidence that those divisions had perished. The inheritance of the new kingdom was the accumulated history.

With this, the chapter closes where the other one must begin. Yugoslavia was not born out of a blank slate, nor from a region that had naturally grown and thus matured into unity. It was born from war, fear, opportunity and the collapse of empires. It was their answer to fragmentation. Concurrently, it was that fragmentation upon which it was built.

Chapter 5: Yugoslavia and its Afterlife

The story of Yugoslavia did not begin in 1918. By the time that Yugoslavia officially rose, the region it was already trying to unite was already shaped by centuries of imperial rule, different levels of development and different political visions. Taking a look back at the previous chapter, it shows us that the Balkans were never simply a clean slate which was patiently waiting to be organised into a coherent political unit. They each already had deeply rutted structures, be it from the Ottoman or Habsburg legacy. The tensions that came from different religions and cultures, then national movements, they were not resolved with Yugoslavia. That was just a deeper dive into them.

This project, the project of Yugoslavia, was being built on shaky legs because the sheer idea of it meant different things for different people. The language of “unity” was suggesting coherence, and even inevitability, but all of that turned out to be a lot messier in reality. Djokić (2003, 4), in his writing, makes this quite clear by stating that Yugoslavia was never just a single, clearly defined program. There were multiple versions of it, and each of them was molded by political actors who disagreed on more than just how a state should be organised and functioning, but also on what the state was supposed to be *fundamentally* (Djokić 2003, 4). Some looked at it as a centralised state that would bring together South Slavs under a strong political core. For the others, it was a federation. Or something akin to a federation where different groups would keep their meaningful autonomy. These disagreements went to the heart of this project.

At this point, the idea of this project was being held together by the shared situation that they all were in, rather than the shared vision they all had. When those empires collapsed, an opening was created. Concurrently, one of the possible answers appeared in the shape of Yugoslavia, which also answered the question of how to actually reorganise the political space in that region at the time. Lampe (1996, 6) pointed out that what came after was not a consolidation of a stable system in earnest, but a much longer process and adjustment. It was an ongoing search for a workable political and economic space (Lampe 1996, 6). This new state assembled regions that were developing under very different conditions. They each had different administrative traditions, economic structures and what their expectations were politically (Lampe 1996, 115, 126).

Here is a reminder to slow down and to resist the temptation of reading everything later on, as something inevitable, something that was bound to happen no matter what. That would be too easy. To look back from the 1990s, to look at Yugoslavia and see a state which was always going to fall apart is too simple a framing. As Gagnon (2004, 7, 33, 51) had argued, those conflicts that were later born cannot be explained by a simple reference to some deep and constant ethnic

hostility. They were the results of the political choices that were made along the way, combined with the way of using and shaping specific moments (Gagnon 2004, 87, 179, 200). Simply said, the diversity of Yugoslavia was not, in itself, the problem. The problem was how that diversity was used, and in the end, abused.

Concurrently, the way we also tell this story is a part of the problem. Ramet (2009, 15) is reminding us that history is never just a neutral retelling of events. It is always a combination of interpretation, selection and emphasis (Ramet 2009, 15). This is particularly valuable in the case of Yugoslavia. In it, different versions of its creation and its collapse tend to say as much about the perspective of those who are telling the story as they do about the events themselves. Some of the explanations have focused on structures, some on the leadership of it, and others looked toward ideology or its international context. The fact that there is no single narrative that is dominating the others is a reflection of the nature of this object itself.

What we are left here with is a state that was, from its very beginning, slightly out of alignment with itself. It was resting on an idea that was never fully agreed upon, although it had functioned as a political system. This is crucial to understand for the approach to the first Yugoslav state. If it is treated as a failed experiment, the fact is that it was also an attempt, however imperfect it might have been, to create something new out of a dire situation, will be missed.

5.1. The First Yugoslavia (1918-1941)

The first Yugoslavia was declared on *1st of December 1918*. Representatives of Croats, Serbs and Slovenes from the former Habsburg lands came to Belgrade and asked *Prince Regent Alexander* to proclaim their union with the Kingdom of Serbia, which had just absorbed Montenegro (Djokić 2003, 12, 13, 35). The Serbs have entered this union with an advantage when compared to the other two. Serbs brought with them the victorious wartime kingdom, its army, dynasty, and capital intact (Lampe 1996, 99, 108). The South Slavs from the ex-Habsburg lands, Croats and Slovenes, entered the playing field from a much more vulnerable position. They were afraid of the Italian territorial claims after the London Agreement of 1915, and they were hoping that their coming together would protect them from any further losses (Ramet 2006, 37, 42). This meant that this act of unification held different meanings. For many Serbian politicians, this was the fulfilment of their national expansion and unification; for many Croats and Slovenes, this was representing a common South Slav state that was built with guarantees of autonomy (Djokić 2003, 4, 274).

This difference in opinion could already be seen before the state was even created. In negotiations that were happening before the wartime, Nikola Pašić had defended a more of a monarchical

and centralist agreement under the dynasty of Karađorđević. Concurrently, figures who were connected to the Yugoslav Committee, primarily Franjo Supilo, had argued for a federal option which would then be based on historical provinces such as *Serbia, Croatia-Slavonia-Dalmatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina* and *Montenegro* (Ramet 2006, 41-42; Djokić 2003, 18, 21). However, the *Corfu Declaration* of 1917 had left many of these questions unanswered. The Declaration was about unity, constitutionalism and the “*three-named people*”, but not about settling the real dispute: if the future state would be centralised from Belgrade or, more so, organised as a union of historically distinct lands (Djokić 2003, 20-21; Ramet 2006, 42). Consequently, the unification did happen in December 1918, and the new state did have its name and a dynasty, but the political foundation was not shared.

This problem was made worse by the early decisions that were made by the central authorities. Belgrade began reducing provincial autonomy almost immediately, rather than waiting for a constitution that would actually define the relationship between the centre and the provinces (Ramet 2006, 52). Ramet (2006, 52) has described how *Svetozar Pribićević*, who was a minister of the interior at the time, asked the provincial governments of Croatia, Slovenia and Dalmatia to resign very soon after unification. Eight of eleven provincial departments were eliminated in Croatia-Slavonia, the powers of the Croatian ban were reduced and on the 30th of November 1920, the *Croatian Sabor* was dissolved by the royal edict, all the while the constitution was still debated on (Ramet 2006, 52). These changes were not small. They were sending a clear message that the new state would not keep the older political institutions of its western lands. For Croatian politicians particularly, this started to look more like they were being absorbed into a system that was led by the Serb part and less like a unification done with agreement.

This fear was confirmed by the *Vidovdan Constitution*. This constitution was adopted on the 28th of June 1921, which was the date of the Serbian national and religious commemoration of Kosovo as well. It had established a centralised monarchy (Singleton 1985, 141, 143). The constitution was passed by majority vote and not by the kind of broad consensus that many of the anti-centralists were expecting (Ramet 2006, 602). *The Constituent Assembly* was boycotted by the *Croatian Peasant Party*, other anti-centralist groups withdrew from it, and *the Communist Party* was banned soon after (Ramet 2006, 55, 57). *Pašić* had managed to secure his support by reaching arrangements with Muslim representatives over issues that were significant to Bosnia, which were including land reform and provincial boundaries (Singleton 1985, 142). The constitution had liberal language about equality, civic rights and religious freedoms, officially. However, Singleton (1985, 142, 143) had noted that the guarantees did not stop the centralist domination in earnest.

This state now had a constitution, but it was already rejected by one of the most important political forces in the country.

Precisely this is why the first Yugoslavia should not be reduced to a simple Serb-Croat conflict, despite this conflict becoming central. Djokić (2003, 139) warns against simplifying interwar politics into simply „Serb in power” and “Croat in opposition”. There were also Serbs who were against centralism, just like there were non-Serbs who were, at the time, participating in it (Djokić 2003, 139). *Stjepan Radić* himself did not simply reject Yugoslavia. He was a part of the Croatian Peasant Party, and with it, he was opposing the Vidovdan framework, but because he wanted a *different* Yugoslavia (Djokić 2003, 144-143). A Yugoslavia that would be based on Croatian autonomy, peasant democracy and a looser understanding of South Slav unity (Djokić 2003, 144). Therefore, this conflict was also a conflict between two different Yugoslavisms. One saw its version of the state as a centralised national monarchy, and the other saw it as a negotiated union of different peoples and historical lands.

The parliamentary system was incapable of absorbing this conflict (Singleton 1985, 145). Elections were held throughout the 1920s. With it, the coalitions were changed, and parties were entering and leaving the government, yet the main question was still unresolved (Djokić 2007, 56, 64-66). *Radić* and *Pribićević*, in 1927, have formed the *Peasant-Democratic Coalition*, joining the Croatian Peasant Party with the Independent Democrats who stood in opposition to the centralism of Belgrade (Djokić 2003, 145; Djokić 2007, 65, 275). How important this alliance was lies in the fact that *Pribićević* had once been one of the strongest supporters of centralisation. His change in sides and in attitude had shown the others that this opposition to the Vidovdan order was not only Croatian anymore. By the end of the 1920s, that system was losing even some of the people who had helped create it in the first place.

The breaking point happened on the 20th of June 1928 (Lampe 1996, 156). There was a debate happening in the assembly, and the topic was the corruption of the government (Lampe 1996, 156). *Puniša Račić*, a Montenegrin Radical deputy who was, at the time, associated with Serbian *Četnik Circles*, shot *Pavle Radić*, *Stjepan Radić* and three other deputies of the opposition (Lampe 1996, 158). *Pavle Radić* was dead on the spot, and only several weeks later, in Zagreb, *Stjepan Radić* also lost his life (Singleton 1985, 150). The opposition withdrew from the parliament after the shooting, and *Radić's* successor, *Vlatko Maček*, started demanding a federal structure in which even the armed forces would be federalised (Singleton 1985, 150). Lampe (1996, 159) had described the parliamentary order as surviving only until December 1928, when the student protests, which were happening in Zagreb, on the tenth anniversary of the unification, had turned into riots

and, in it, the police had killed a dozen students. By that time, the parliament was no longer functioning as a space where any of the state's disputes could be negotiated.

King Alexander's answer to this was dictatorship (Djokić 2007, 275). On the 6th of January, he had abolished the Vidovdan Constitution, dissolved the parliament and banned political parties (Djokić 2007, 69). On the 3rd of October, the state had its name officially changed to the *Kingdom of Yugoslavia*, and it was divided into nine *banovinas*, which got their names mostly from rivers, rather than historical provinces (Djokić 2003, 149). The intent here was clear: older regional and national identities had to be weakened, and a new integral Yugoslav identity was to be imposed from above (Djokić 2003, 146). Alexander was describing Yugoslavia as a "higher synthesis" of national expression, but the contradiction could be seen. A state that did not succeed in creating consent through constitutional politics was now trying to create unity with authoritarian rule (Djokić 2003, 148, 150).

However, this dictatorship was not the answer to the national question. It was successful in suppressing political life, but it was not as successful in removing the very reasons why the Croats, Bosnians, Muslims, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Albanians and many Serbs disagreed over the meaning of the state. Lampe (1996, 160) notes that the British ambassador *Neville Henderson* observed in 1933 that "it is easier to say Yugoslavia than to make it". This sentence was the best description of the problems in the kingdom. The word "Yugoslavia", it could be placed on maps, institutions and official documents, but the political community behind it stayed brittle. In *October of 1934*, Alexander was assassinated in Marseille by Croat and Macedonian separatists (Djokić 2003, 152). With that, the regime had lost the figure that was associated, most closely, with integral Yugoslavism (Djokić 2003, 153). Furthermore, it still did not have any democratic alternative ready (Lampe 1996, 183).

In 1939, there was the final attempt at a compromise. After *Milan Stojadinović* fell from power, *Dragiša Cvetković* negotiated with Vladko Maček, and from that negotiation came the *Cvetković-Maček Agreement*, or *Sporazum*, on the 26th of August 1939. This agreement produced the *Banovina of Croatia* by combining the *Sava river* and *Primorje banovinas* with districts such as *Dubrovnik*, *Šid*, *Ilok*, *Brčko*, *Gradačac*, *Derventa*, *Travnik* and *Fojnica* (Ramet 2006, 104-107). Maček took the role of deputy prime minister, and Ivan *Šubašić* became the ban of the new Croatian unit (Ramet 2006, 106-107). This was the first serious step toward recognizing that Croatia could not simply be treated as an administrative part of a centralized Yugoslavia.

This agreement was described by Ramet (2006, 4) as too little and too late. It did finally address the Croatian question, but the other ones were left open (Lampe 1996, 160). Serbs who were living in the new Banovina were afraid of subordination (Lampe 1996, 192). Bosnian Muslims were

against the partition of the Bosnian territory (Ramet 2006, 108). Slovenes could ask why they, too, did not receive similar autonomy as the Croats did (Ramet 2006, 4). And many Serbian politicians were against this agreement because they saw it as a threat to the state (Ramet 2006, 107). Lampe (1996, 160) stressed that the *Sporazum* did create a special Croatian arrangement, but that the rest of Yugoslavia stayed under the management of Belgrade. Thus, this was not a full federal settlement; it was more of an uneven compromise, which came to be because of the pressure of international crises.

One week later, Hitler invaded Poland. In *April of 1941*, less than two years later, Axis forces invaded Yugoslavia (Lampe 1996, 160; Ramet 2006, 111).

The first Yugoslavia, therefore, did not only fail because of foreign invasion. The invasion did destroy it, but the state was already not successful in creating a more durable agreement on sovereignty, identity and participation. It had tried its hand in centralism, parliamentarism, dictatorship and finally partial compromise. Every one of these arrangements was avoiding certain problems, while concurrently making other ones. Yet, this does not mean that the first Yugoslavia was meaningless or doomed from its birth. It was still offering protection from external claims, it made a new political and economic connections and it gave an institutional form to a real South Slav idea.

5.2. The Second Yugoslavia (1945-1980s)

The Second Yugoslavia, or rather, *the socialist Yugoslavia*, came to be as a correction of the first Yugoslavia (Djokić 2007, 277; Ramet 2006, 163). The *Partisans* did not simply just restore the country that collapsed in *April of 1941*, they have rebuilt it around the claim that the kingdom failed because it was too centralised, too unequal and too blind, or more so ignorant, to the national question (Lampe 1996, 5). Thus, the new Yugoslavia had to look and be different from the first one. After the Second World War had ended, Yugoslavia was born as a federation of six republics: *Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia* (Lampe 1996, 226; Djokić 2013, 64). It also had two autonomous units in Serbia, and those were *Vojvodina* and *Kosovo* (Lampe 1996, 226). This agreement was more than just simply administration. It was meant to represent that the communist state had learned from the interwar failure (Djokić 2007, 277). Macedonians were no longer treated as “South Serbs”, Montenegro was recognised as a separate republic, Bosnia and Herzegovina stayed whole and was not divided between Serbia and Croatia, and Croatia finally gained the status of a republic which the interwar compromise had never fully secured for it (Lampe 1996, 114, 226; Ramet 2006, 163).

However, this new federalism was never a liberal democracy. *The constitution of 1946* did give the state a federal shape, but its real power stayed in *the Communist Party* and around the

leadership of *Josip Broz Tito*. Lampe (1996, 7, 230) had noted that the early, post-war constitution resembled that of *Stalin's 1936 constitution*. That meant that its federal language did not automatically create genuine republican autonomy (Lampe 1996, 7, 230). This shows that the socialist Yugoslavia came to be on a double movement from the beginning. On the one hand, it had recognised nations and republics, and it took them more seriously than the previous one had done (Jović 2009, 57). On the other hand, it had kept political competition under strict party control (Ramet 2006, 163). Thus, the system was not based on pluralism, but rather on managed equality. Difference was accepted, but only if it was within socialism (Jović 2009, 270, 323).

Then came the "*Brotherhood and Unity*", or rather "*Bratstvo i Jedinstvo*". This is the phrase that held Yugoslavia together. This was not just a slogan for posters and school ceremonies. This was produced directly out of the Partisan war, and it had become the moral foundation of this new state (Ramet 2006, 185). The communists were claiming that all of the people of Yugoslavia were fighting together against fascism and domestic collaborators, and with that, no nation had the right to claim the state for itself. Djokic's (2003, 157) *Yugoslavism* includes a later instance of Tito on how Yugoslav belonging should not mean old-style unitarism. Tito had argued that Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, Bosnians, Montenegrins and Macedonians were all also citizens of socialist Yugoslavia, but he had rejected any *Yugoslavhood* which would deny the role of nations (Jović 2003, 157). Comparatively, *Kardelj* had phrased this issue in a different manner. For him, Yugoslavism could not become a different nation; the essence of it had to be socialist consciousness and not national fusion (Jović 2003, 157). This difference between Tito and Kardelj mattered deeply as Tito still felt Yugoslav unity as a political and emotional project, whereas Kardelj, he increasingly saw Yugoslavia as a system for advancing socialism through decentralisation.

In 1948, a break between Stalin and Tito came, and that moment made Yugoslavia even more distinct (Banac 1988, 9, 10). Before this split, Yugoslavia was still following the Soviet model (Banac 1988, 3-4). However, after the Cominform conflict, Yugoslavia had to justify itself as socialist, but not Soviet (Banac 1988, 10). Banac's (1988, 10, 12) work on *the Cominform crisis* shows how serious this rupture actually was. The conflict with Stalin was more than diplomatic; it was internal, it involved arrests, purges and repression of suspected pro-Soviet communists (Lampe 1996, 248-249). Consequently, this split gave Tito and his regime a new kind of legitimacy (Jović 2009, 59-60). Now, Yugoslavia could present itself as independent from Moscow, different from the Soviet bloc, and later on, as a founder of the non-aligned path (Lampe 1996, 2, 262). Self-management of workers, which was formally introduced in 1950, became a part of this identity (Jović 2009, 14, 60). It made a promise that Yugoslav socialism would be more democratic

and that it would be less statist than Soviet socialism (Jović 2009, 14, 41). Despite this promise, in practice, the party had continued to dominate Yugoslavia's political life (Jović 2009, 2, 59).

There was a problem here, because that self-management and decentralisation did not hold the same meaning to everyone (Jović 2009, 159). Jović (2009, 3, 14, 20, 66, 78, 83) had argued that the ideology of Yugoslavia contained a contradiction: it was a state which was built on an anti-statist socialist idea, the idea that the state should gradually “wither away”. That meant that the more the system developed self-management, the more it made weaker the federal centre and strengthened republics, provinces, local elites and enterprises. Likewise, Lampe (1996, 256) shows that *the reform of the constitution* done in 1953 had used the language of decentralisation and self-management, but that it had also created new ambiguities about where sovereignty actually lay. Yet, this was not destructive immediately (Lampe 1996, 260). This had made the system flexible for a while. Concurrently, this meant that Yugoslavia was held together less by its strong institutions than by Tito, party discipline, economic growth and the sheer belief that socialism could actually manage national differences.

This is seen clearly when looking at Croatia. Jović (2011, 117) argued against the idea that socialist Yugoslavia was simply a “prison” for the Croatian nation. The second Yugoslavia, for Croatia, had actually delivered a lot of what the interwar Croatian political movement was after: the status of a republic and federal recognition (Jović 2011, 124, 128). In other words, Croatia was not just an administrative region in a centralised monarchy that was the first Yugoslavia; now it had become a republic in a federation (Jović 2011, 124-125)). However, its position was also ambivalent (Jović 2011, 128). Croatia was one of the stronger republics. Zagreb was a major industrial and cultural centre that contained the Yugoslav Lexicographical Institute, the oldest university in the country, RTV Zagreb, and the first Television station (Jović 2011, 127). Jović (2011, 127) argued that this strength was not always an advantage. In a federation which was built against domination, the sheer size of Croatia and its development were making the others suspicious (Jović 2011, 127-128). As Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of those less developed regions, it was afraid that Croatia might dominate, either alone or together with Serbia (Jović 2011, 127-128). Thus, Croatia had gained a lot from that socialist federalism, but it also had to constantly prove to the others that it was not seeking privilege (Jović 2011, 127-128).

The position of Slovenia was different. It was smaller, more compact nationally, and it was the republic which was economically the most developed when compared to the other ones. At the same time, it was not carrying the same wartime burden as the *NDH* (Independent state of Croatia) in the same way that Croatia had to, nor did it have the same amount of Serb minority as Croatia did. The interview done with one of the Slovenian scholars, Cirila Toplak, is useful here. In the

interview, Toplak (2026) did not describe the Yugoslav experience of Slovenia as simply imposed or foreign. She had described Yugoslavia, especially *after 1918*, as a “*daring new political experiment*” (Toplak 2026). In socialist Yugoslavia, Slovenia had participated in the same institutions as the rest of the country: in schooling, pioneer rituals, youth organisations, federal holidays and the Yugoslav People’s Army. However, because of its greater development and the fact that it was geographically closer to Austria and Italy, Slovenia could more easily imagine itself as Central European (Toplak 2026). Its economic position within the federation was only reinforcing this view. Lampe (1996, 74, 180, 239, 364) had noted that Slovenia had entered socialist Yugoslavia with a relatively advanced industrial base and workforce which was already used to industrial production, which had also allowed it to benefit more quickly from post-war development strategies (Lampe 1996, 74, 239). What had made this early advantage even stronger was *the economic reforms of the 1960s*, when greater enterprise autonomy gave more efficient republic-level economies, like the one of Slovenia, to expand their production and external trade (Woodward 1995, 244-245, 284, 293). Those Slovenian firms were extremely well-positioned to engage with markets in the West because of their geographic proximity and existing infrastructural links. All of this had differentiated them more from those more inward-looking economies of the southern republics (Woodward 1995, 248, 264, 293). Slovenian elites, at the political level, were in consistent support of decentralisation, seeing federal economic restriction as more restrictive than protective (Jovic 2009, 15). After the constitutional changes of 1970, this was even more visible. Those changes brought expansion of republic-level authority, and with it, Slovenia got greater control over its own economic policy (Djokic 2003, 80, 94). Patterson (2011, 5-6, 48) also notes that the population of Slovenia was among those who were the most exposed to Western consumer culture, cross-border mobility and trade, which in turn reinforced their sense of difference within the Yugoslav system. These developments did not immediately undermine the Yugoslav identity. However, they did create a space where Slovenia started to experience Yugoslavia as more of a constraint than a necessity.

This leads to Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo, where the contrast between them and the previous two was not only cultural, it was material. Woodward (1995, 101, 103) notes that the unemployment and employment rates were noticeably different across the federation. By the time 1973 came, Slovenia had effectively full employment, which was not the case with the other republics (Woodward 1995, 103, 196). This means that a young person in Ljubljana experienced socialism with modernisation, employment and consumer access, while another young person in Pristina, Skopje or parts of Bosnia experienced waiting, underemployment and dependence on redistribution (Woodward 1995, 109, 336). Precisely this is where

the north-south divide became politically dangerous. Slovenia and Croatia were usually of the opinion that they were financing the federation, while the other republics were more heavily dependent on federal development funds (Woodward 1995, 356, 358). However, those less developed regions were not just simply “behind” because of their culture or their mentality. The state in which they entered Yugoslavia had a much different historical inheritance than the other two. They had a weaker industrial basis, a more rural population, their infrastructure was more poor, and they had fewer employment opportunities (Woodward 1995, 38, 43, 283). Socialist industrialisation had tried to close this gap; however, Woodward (1995, 14, 4, 30, 310, 367) has shown that the very system that had promised employment security created what she calls “*socialist unemployment*”. Lampe (1996, 3, 327, 294) had also made a connection between unemployment and regional disparity and the failure of Yugoslavia. He described it as an economic union and stated that the movement out of agriculture did not actually create a development that was balanced across the whole of the country (Lampe 1996, 149, 289, 291). Ergo, this economic system did modernise Yugoslavia, but it did not equally modernise all of its parts.

Now, getting to one of the main player of Yugoslavia, Serbia. Serbia must be placed at the centre of this story, because many of the conflicts that happened later grew precisely out of the position that Serbia held within this socialist federalism. The clear paradox here is very well explained by Miller’s (1997) chapter. Serbs were, quite widely, spread across Yugoslavia. They were proper in Serbia, Vojvodina, Kosovo, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro (Miller 1997, 291-292). Miller (1997, 294) noted that in 1981, only around 58 percent of Serbs were actually living in Serbia. A significant number of them were living in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Vojvodina, while Kosovo was carrying a symbolic importance, which went far beyond its population (Miller 1997, 294). Looking through the perspective of Serbs, Tito’s Yugoslavia was comprised of unhappy ironies (Miller 1997, 294). During the Second World War, Serbs had suffered heavily, and they provided many early Partisans (Miller 1997, 293-294). Yet, the post-war Serbia ended up being internally divided by the autonomy of Vojvodina and Kosovo, while the Serbs outside of Serbia were living within other republics (Miller 1997, 293-294). This did not produce open resistance right away at first, because the strong Yugoslavia had also protected Serbs across the borders of the republic (Miller 1997, 291, 295). However, as the centralisation was getting deeper, many Serbs were of the opinion that federalism was breaking down.

The turning point came in 1966, when *Aleksandar Ranković* was removed. Ranković was representing the centralist and security-oriented wing of the system, and many who were not Serbs were associating him with Serbian dominance (Miller 1997, 295-296). Miller (1997, 296) noted that the fall of Ranković was seen by many Serbs as an affront, whereas his fall had brought relief

in Kosovo. After 1966, the Albanian majority in Kosovo managed to gain greater influence. The police forces, which were previously Serb-dominated, have been remodelled. Albanians have entered the *nomenklatura*, and after *the unrest in 1968*, other adjustments followed. In 1969, *the University of Pristina* was founded as an Albanian-language institution (Miller 1997, 296). The official term “Albanian” had replaced the previous derogatory term “Šiptar”, and “Kosovo-Metohija” had been shortened to only “Kosovo” (Miller 1997, 296-297). For Albanians, this represented recognition. Concurrently, for many Serbs, this looked like Serbia was losing control over a province that was central to Serbian history and mythology (Miller 1997, 297, 300).

This problem was deepened with *the 1974 Constitution* (Jović 2009, 68). That constitution gave the republics and autonomous provinces extensive powers, and it had also made Kosovo and Vojvodina direct participants in the federal system (Jović 2009, 11, 172). Through the viewpoint of Slovenia, Croatia and Kosovo, this meant protection from Belgrade (Jović 2009, 249). However, through the viewpoint of many Serbs, this meant that Serbia had been made unequal inside its own republic (Jović 2009, 172-173). Jović (2009, 11, 68) argued that the constitution of 1974 represented a triumph of Kardelj’s concept. That being said, Yugoslavia was to survive through decentralisation, self-management and the sovereignty of its own constituent parts, and not through a central state (Jović 2009, 62-63, 66). On the other hand, this created a dangerous asymmetry. The system, which was fashioned to prevent domination, also made common decision-making harder (Jović 2009, 20, 32, 172). It was exactly this that had created a Serbian grievance that would later be exploited by *Slobodan Milošević*.

Socialist Yugoslavia also existed in the habits of ordinary citizens; ergo, its everyday life cannot be reduced only to constitutional conflict. Toplak’s (2026) memories of Slovenia are important here as they show how Yugoslavia was lived through institutions. Children were becoming pioneers, young people were passing through socialist youth structures, and men were serving in the Yugoslav People’s Army. They were usually being stationed outside of their own republic, in other parts of Yugoslavia, where they had formed friendships that went over regional and national lines (Toplak 2026). Patterson (2011) gives this, everyday Yugoslavia, another dimension. From the mid-1950s onward, Yugoslavia gave for consumer culture which was unusual in the socialist world. Clothes, appliances, travel agencies, discotheques, advertising and shopping had become a part of daily life (Patterson 2011, 1). The citizens of Yugoslavia were able to travel more freely than people in most Soviet bloc countries (Patterson 2011, 5, 316). They were able to compare themselves with the West and buy goods in places like *Trieste, Graz or Klagenfurt* (Patterson 2011, 5, 308). This “*Good Life*” was not superficial. This is precisely what had helped to make the system legitimate (Patterson 2011, 16, 292, 316-317).

However, this legitimacy was depending on performance. Patterson (2011, 306, 314, 316) argues that this consumerism is what had helped to hold Yugoslavia's multiethnic society together during the 1960s and 1970s, because abundance made civic contentment, and it had seemed to prove that Yugoslav socialism could provide goods which were comparable to those of the capitalist West. Still, this helped to create a trap. Once the citizens of Yugoslavia started expecting good clothes, appliances, travel, cars and holidays, well, the state had to keep delivering (Patterson 2011, 17, 317, 319). So, when the economy went down in the 1980s, the disappointment of those citizens was that much greater, especially since the promise of it had been so strong (Patterson 2011, 17, 108, 317, 319). Shortages, inflation, unemployment and the sheer debt weakened more than just the purchasing power. They have made the belief in the Yugoslav model itself weaker (Patterson 2011, 46, 295, 318-319) .

Therefore, the fragility of the system was exposed in the 1980s. Concurrently, when Tito died on the 4th of May 1980, that too had removed the final arbiter of disputes between republics and party factions (Miller 1997, 303, 305). The economic crisis grew. Albanian protests in Kosovo in 1981 have opened the question, once again, of the status of the province, and along with it, Serbian fears (Miller 1997, 304-305). In Serbia, intellectual and political opposition was now, more than ever, focused on Kosovo and Serbia's position across Yugoslavia (Miller 1997, 303, 305). Miller (1997, 304, 306) pointed to the speech that *Dobrica Ćosić* made in 1977 at the *Serbian Academy of Science and Arts* as an important moment in the revival of Serbian grievance narratives. In Slovenia, by the late 1980s, the youth press, peace movements and critics of the Yugoslav People's Army created an open conflict with federal institutions (Jović 2009, 314-315, 325-326, 369). Jović (2009, 327) had described the 1988 arrests of *Janez Janša*, *David Tasić*, *Franci Yavrl* and *Ivan Boštner* as a decisive moment in the confrontation between Slovenia and the army. Now, Serbia and Slovenia were heading in different directions. Serbia was heading towards recentralization and Slovenia toward liberalization and exit (Jović 2009, 307).

This is why the second Yugoslavia, the socialist Yugoslavia, was more strong and more fragile than it actually appeared at first. It was stronger than the kingdom in the fact that it had recognized what the kingdom would not. It had recognized nations, republics and provinces (Jović 2009, 57). It had given Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina an institutional status (Djokić 2003, 120). It had allowed Slovenia to modernize within a federal system (Woodward 1995, 296). It had created a shared everyday world, through schooling, youth rituals, the army, work, travel and consumer culture (Patterson 2011, 17, 306). Yet, it was still fragile because the mechanisms that managed differences have also preserved it. Slovenia and Croatia were richer and ever more impatient with redistribution (Jović 2009, 15). Kosovo, Macedonia,

Montenegro and Bosnia were faced with deeper unemployment and their developmental weaknesses (Woodwards 1995, 208). Serbia was feeling divided and constrained by the autonomy of its provinces and by the dispersion of Serbs outside Serbia proper (Miller 1997, 40, 320). Croatia was satisfied with its republicanism, but burdened by suspicion at the same time (Cipek 2003, 81). Bosnia was dependent on Yugoslavia because its own position was too vulnerable between the Serbian and Croatian national projects (Djokić 2003, 112).

Ergo, socialist Yugoslavia had worked, not because it had erased differences, but rather because it had managed, for several decades, those differences through the authority of Tito, federal structure, party discipline, its anti-fascist legitimacy, self-management, non-alignment and everyday social bonds. The failure of Yugoslavia was not automatic. It should not be read backwards as inevitable. But by the 1980s, the support that had once made the system run was getting weaker at the same time. Tito was gone, the economy was in crisis, unemployment was unevenly on the rise, the sole structure of the federation had made any decisive action difficult and republican elites started speaking in a language of their own interests (Jović 2009, 28; Patterson 2011, 295).

The second Yugoslavia had solved some of the problems that the first one could not, but it had also created new ones. It was proof that a shared Yugoslav life was possible; however, it had also shown how quickly that shared life could become unstable, once ideology, economy and federal compromise sopped with the reinforcement of one another.

5.3. The Collapse of Yugoslavia

Yugoslavia started its road towards its collapse *before* the wars of 1991 (Jović 2009, 28). Slovenia and Croatia had declared their independence in *June 1991*, and by that time, the federal state had already been weakened by the economic crisis, the paralysis of the constitution, the collapse of the *League of Communists*, and the struggle between 2 projects which were opposite (Jović 2009, 12, 15, 32, 363). Those two opposites were Serbian recentralization and Slovenian and Croatian combined, decentralization (Jović 2009, 324). Jović (2009, 13, 15) had argued that Yugoslavia did not collapse only because of the return of the ancient national conflicts, but rather because the ideological and political consensus, which had held the federation together in the first place, broke down after 1974. Ramet (2006) made a similar point but from another angle. This crisis was a crisis of legitimacy, because the system did not produce trust anymore, authority or shared political direction (Ramet 2006, 13, 325-326, 379).

The first crack can actually be seen in Kosovo. The year was 1981, protests were being held in Albania, and they were demanding that Kosovo receive the status of a republic (Marmullaku 2003, 131, 305; Cipek 2003, 82). Conversely, political and intellectual circles in Serbia had demanded a revision of the 1974 *Constitution*. That was the constitution that had given Kosovo and Vojvodina extensive autonomy inside Serbia (Cipek 2003, 82; Pavlowitch 2003, 67). This was anything but a small constitutional disagreement. This autonomy was still not enough for the Kosovo Albanians because Kosovo stayed a province and not a republic (Marmullaku 2003, 131, 307). However, for many Serbs, the order from 1974 held the meaning that Serbia had been made weaker inside its own borders (Pavlowitch 2003, 67). Cipek (2003, 82) and Pavlowitch (2003, 67) argued that after the death of Tito, Albanians in Kosovo were demanding that republican status, while Serbia, increasingly so, wanted a return to the pre-1974 order.

Here enters Slobodan Milošević, but not as an outsider to the communist system; he came from within it (Jović 2009, 30-31). A decisive moment happened in *Kosovo Polje* in April 1987 (Jović 2009, 258). Jović (2009, 258) described how Milošević faced a crowd of Serbs and Montenegrins there. The crowd had wanted to speak to Milošević directly, without local representatives, because they did not trust those anymore (Jović 2009, 258). When the police used truncheons against the crowds, Milošević came outside and spoke a sentence that had later become a political myth: “No one will ever beat you again” (Jović 2009, 258). This sentence was crucial, but not because of the words that he chose to use. As Jović (2009, 258-259) had noted, the speech was connecting Milošević directly to the Kosovo Serb population that was dissatisfied. That had created a new relationship between the leadership of Serbia and mass mobilization (Jović 2009, 29).

The event at Kosovo Polje was later remembered as the beginning of Milošević’s nationalist turn (Bieber et al 2014, 185). However, the sources are showing something more complicated. In *Debating the End of Yugoslavia* (Bieber et al. 2014, 180), this same moment was described as chaotic. Thousands of people were gathered outside of *Dom Kulture*, the police had intervened, stones were being thrown, and Milošević had addressed the crowd right after he was told that they were beaten (Bieber et al 2014, 180). Ivan Stambolić had later contested the meaning of that famous sentence that Milošević had said. He had argued that Milošević narrowed “the people” to Serbian people (Bieber et al. 2014, 180). Jović (2009, 259) had noted that the speech that Milošević gave had combined three registers. One was communist rhetoric, the second was direct democratic language, and the third was patriotic-nationalist language (Jović 2009, 259). Precisely, this mixture can explain why Milošević was so effective. He had not presented himself as openly anti-Yugoslav. He had presented himself as the defender of Yugoslavia, socialism, Serbia and “the people”, all at the same time (Jović, 260).

After he had consolidated power in Serbia in *September of 1987*, Milošević had also made changes to the constitution, his main goal (Jović 2009, 308). Jović (2009, 308) shows that by *1988-1989*, the debate over amendments to the 1974 Constitution had uncovered deep divisions between the republics and provinces. Particularly over the relationship of Serbia with Vojvodina and Kosovo (Jović 2009, 308). Allies of Milošević and he himself were describing that provincial opposition as “bureaucratic”. Whereas leaders in Vojvodina were accusing the leaders in Serbia of nationalism and unitarism (Jović 2009, 308-309). This became the beginning of the so-called anti-bureaucratic revolution. It was not only a nationalist campaign, it was also a form of mass politics that were using dissatisfaction with elites, the economic crisis and demands for accountability to remove leadership in Vojvodina, Montenegro and Kosovo (Jović 2009, 308-309; Vladislavljević 2011, 153, 155-156).

Montenegro is an example of these workings in practice. According to the chapter in *New Perspectives of Yugoslavia* (Djokić and Ker-Lindsay 2011, 155), the economy of Montenegro was in big trouble by the second half of *1988*. Large state enterprises were close to collapse, workers had recently been laid off, and many industrial workers were receiving only minimal wages (Vladislavljević 2011, 155). On the *10th* and *11th* of *January 1989*, demonstrations in *Titograd* had begun, with around 1,000 workers from Radoje Dakić. However, this number had soon grown to tens of thousands (Vladislavljević 2011, 155). By the next day, the numbers were nearing 100,000 protesters, where people were reportedly in the streets in a republic which only contained around 600,000 people. The leadership had resigned. The importance of this is in the fact that it is showing that the rise of Milošević cannot be explained only by nationalism. Socio-economic anger, protests of workers and elite conflict were also a big part of that same wave of destabilization (Vladislavljević 2011, 155-156).

Subsequently, the Serbian project was colliding with that of Slovenia (Jović 2009, 284). By the late *1980s*, Slovenia had been on the move toward liberalization, civil society activism and looser federation (Jović 2009, 326, 329-330). Serbia, on the other hand, was heading toward re-centralization (Jović 2009, 333). Jović (2009, 283-284) had, once again, quoted Milošević in *April of 1989*, where he was promising that Serbia would not give up Yugoslavia, or socialism or democratic processes. Concurrently, in *June of 1989*, Milan Kučan had rejected majority rule in a multiethnic federation because it would deny the equality and sovereignty of people (Jović 2009, 307). These two statements have captured the conflict really well. Milošević’s wish was a stronger Yugoslavian state in which Serbia would be acting through majority power. Comparatively, Kučan was wanting for a federation in which republics kept sovereignty and could decide what powers to delegate to the center.

Another breaking point came at the *Fourteenth Extraordinary Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia*, in January of 1990 (Ramet 2006, 372). This is actually one of the most important moments in the collapse. Jović (2009, 350) gave the details: the amendments of Slovenia were repeatedly rejected, also including the proposal to define the League of Communists of Yugoslavia as an organization of equal republican organizations. When it had become very clear that Slovenes would be constantly outvoted by a majority which was Serb-led, the Slovenian delegation decided to leave the congress. Serbian delegates were applauding (Jović 2009, 350-351). After the Slovenes had left, Milošević had proposed for them to continue, without the 114 Slovenian delegates, but the Croatian delegation was against it and had objected while arguing that a League of Communists without the Slovenes was no longer a Yugoslav organization (Jović 2009, 351). The congress was then postponed indefinitely (Jović 2009, 351). However, in practice, the federal party ceased to function (Lampe 1996, 347).

This was more than simply the collapse of a party congress. The party, in socialist Yugoslavia, was actually the real binding institution of the state (Lampe 1996, 346). When the League of Communists broke apart, a strong federal mechanism that was capable of resolving disputes between republics no longer existed. Lampe (2000, 347) noted that after the Slovenes walked out and the Croats had refused to continue without them, the federal party “effectively ceased to exist”. Although the state did manage to survive for a year and a half more, through the promise of market reform and multiparty elections (Lampe 1996, 347). Ramet (2006, 372) was even sharper: the “Congress of Salvation” had ended in a complete fiasco, and twelve years later, the Slovenian party pulled out of the LCY, destroying the remaining appearance of unity.

At this point, the collapse of Yugoslavia had moved from party politics into republican politics. In 1990, multiparty elections had changed the balance in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Ramet 2006, 6, 356-357). Under Milan Kučan, Slovenia was moving toward independence (Ramet 2006, 356). In Croatia, the Croatian Democratic Party under Franjo Tuđman had won power, while the Croatian Serbs were organized around the Serbian Democratic Party in Krajina (Ramet 2006, 356, 383). Ramet (2006, 374, 383) had noted that by the *October of 1990*, the JNA was already, indirectly, involved in arming and training Serb forces in Croatia. At the same time, local Serbs had raided police stations and gun shops, felled trees so that they could create barricades and they have also built their own police structures (Ramet 2006, 361, 374). Gagnon (2004, 149, 151) had argued that violence was not a spontaneous eruption of ethnic hatred. He wrote that it was a political strategy in which fear and provocation were used to demobilise moderate alternatives and push communities toward hardline positions (Gagnon 2004, 149).

The exit of Slovenia was violent, but limited. On *the 25th of June 1991*, Slovenia, alongside Croatia, had declared independence (Ramet 2006, 392). Ramet (2006, 392) had described how the Slovenes were already prepared. They had fortified their borders, established control points, drawn up mobilisation plans and prepared barricades (Ramet 2006, 393). The JNA had moved on the *27th of June*, crossed at *Melika* and attempted to take control of border posts and *Brnik airport* (Ramet 2006, 392-393). However, the territorial defense of Slovenia was organised, motivated, and they were also operating on familiar territory (Ramet 2006, 393-395). Glenny's (1996, 96-97) account adds how the atmosphere at the time was: JNA conscripts seemed confused about their role, while Slovenian Territorial Defense units were prepared to fight.

There was a reason for why the war in Slovenia stayed short, and it was not that the JNA did not have the capacity to crush Slovenia. Ramet (2006, 395) had stated that what was lacking was not military resources, but rather it was political will. Borisav Jović had, on the *30th of June 1991*, told the army generals that the federal Assembly should recognize the independence of Slovenia and the end of the JNA mission in Slovenia (Ramet 2006, 395). The deeper reason behind that was strategic. Milošević, actually, did not have a major territorial claim on Slovenia (Ramet 2006, 393). As Ramet (2006, 393) had noted, the priority of Milošević was not Slovenia; it was rather redrawing borders so that Serbs in Croatia and Serbs in Bosnia would be included in a Serbian state which would be expanded. Glenny (1996, 97) had made the same point but in another way: Slovenia could act as a catalyst, but the real potential for massive instability lay in the conflict between Serbs and Croats, not Slovenia itself.

Compared to Slovenia, Croatia contained a large Serb minority and because the JNA, increasingly so, operated as a force that was aligned with the aims of the Serbs (Ramet 2006, 398). By *mid-1991*, the conflict had already moved beyond a constitutional dispute. Ramet (2006, 374, 383) had described the training and funding of Serb paramilitary units, how the arms were shipped through *Knin* and the creation of rebel Serb police structures. Glenny (1996, 102) wrote about how quickly the atmosphere in Croatia was deteriorating. *Eastern Slovenia, Osijek, Tenja, Glina* and the road of "*Brotherhood and Unity*" had become places or checkpoints, fears and armed mobilization (Glenny 1996, 102, 89, 91, 93-93). The *autumn of 1991* came, and the war had become a Serb-Croat war over territory, with the JNA no longer behaving as a neutral Yugoslav army (Glenny 1996, 97).

The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina had become the most tragic one, due to it not being able to escape the conflict between the national projects of Serbia and Croatia. Lampe (1996, 354) had noted that the elections in Bosnia, which were held in *1990*, had brought nationalist parties to power. Alija Izetbegović's SDA, Radovan Karadžić's SDS and the Croatian HDZ were the parties

that came to power with those elections (Lampe 1996, 354). During their campaigns, the leaders were claiming that they could protect the interests of Bosnia inside Yugoslavia (Lampe 1996, 354). However, after the elections, they started moving in the direction of separate ethnic programs. In *October of 1991*, Karadžić and his SDS had left the Bosnian parliament and had created a rival assembly in Banja Luka (Lampe 1996, 354-355). When Bosnia held its independence referendum on *the 29th of February* and on *the 1st of March 1992*, the SDS had boycotted it. Concurrently, Sarajevo was still experiencing huge demonstrations for peaceful coexistence after the vote. Lampe (1996, 355) had stressed that urban elites in Sarajevo and Tuzla, still had believed that their mixed civic culture would succeed in stopping the war from happening. They were wrong.

Ramet (2006) shows how the war was prepared before Bosnia was internationally recognized. In *September of 1991*, Serbs in Bosnia had appealed to the JNA for “protection”, and the JNA had moved troops into Bosnia (Ramet 2006, 416). That had opened a southern front toward *Vukovar*. After the Bosnian parliament debated sovereignty in *October*, 73 Serbian deputies walked out. Karadžić was warning that Bosnia was being put on the same road to hell as Croatia and Slovenia (Ramet 2006, 416-417). When *November of 1991* came, the SDS had already drawn more than fifty municipalities into an illegal para-state network (Ramet 2006, 417). In *December*, the “*Assembly of the Serbian People*” had announced a Serbian state inside Bosnia and Herzegovina (Ramet 2006, 417). With that, in *January of 1992*, the *Serb Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina* was born (Ramet 2006, 382).

The Bosnian war was not a sudden explosion after the recognition. Those structures of partition had already been built. After the independence was recognized in *April of 1992*, the JNA had formally withdrew into the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. However, Serb officials and soldiers who were born in Bosnia, they had stayed to create the Bosnian Serb Army. They have also kept much of the JNA’s weaponry and heavy artillery (Ramet 2006, 429). What came out of that was catastrophic. With all of these developments, Bosnia had become the grounds of ethnic cleansings, siege warfare and mass displacement (Ramet 2006, 433). Sarajevo had been shelled, and snipers were targeting civilians (Ramet 2006, 428). *Mostar* had become a site of fighting between Bosniaks and Croats in 1993 (Ramet 2006, 10, 438). In *July of 1995*, a UN-protected “safe area”, *Srebrenica*, was overrun by forces of Ratko Mladić, and between seven and eight thousand Bosniak men were killed (Ramet 2006, 444, 460).

The final settlement happened in *November of 1995* in Dayton (Ramet 2006, 466). The settlement had ended the war, but it had also confirmed the transformation of internal republican borders of Yugoslavia into new international and quasi-international divisions (Ramet 2006, 466, 473). Under the mediation of the US, with Richard Holbrooke and Warren Christopher involved,

Milošević from the Serbs side, Tuđman from the Croatian side and Izetbegović from the Bosniak side, had negotiated (Ramet 2006, 465-466). Bosnia had survived as one state, but it had been divided into two highly autonomous entities: *the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina* and *Republika Srpska* (Ramet 2006, 466, 473). The territory of Republika Srpska was reduced to 49 percent of Bosnia (Ramet 2006, 466). This had displaced around half of the prewar population of Bosnia, and it had left nearly 100,000 people dead, according to the later estimates cited in the sources (Ramet 2006, 433, 466).

Therefore, the roots of the collapse of Yugoslavia were not caused by one single event in earnest (Jović 2009, 13). Kosovo Polje mattered because it was an example of how Serbian grievance could be, and had been turned into mass politics (Jović 2009, 258). The anti-bureaucratic revolution mattered because it had changed the balance of power in Serbia, Vojvodina, Kosovo and Montenegro (Jović 2009, 275, 309). The Fourteenth Congress mattered because it had destroyed the League of Communists, which was the all-Yugoslav political institution (Ramet 2006, 340, 372). Slovenia was important because it had proved that the exit was possible (Glenny 1996, 127). Croatia was important because it had turned the question of borders into war (Gagnon 2004, 142). Bosnia had mattered because it had shown the full violence of trying to translate national claims into territory (Ramet 2006, 429). This is precisely the *why* of why the collapse cannot be simply reduced to either “ancient hatred” or to only one leader alone. However, Serbia under Milošević had to remain central to the explanation, because the project of recentralizing Yugoslavia, then redrawing borders where that recentralisation had failed, had transformed that crisis into a war.

5.4. Yugoslavia After Yugoslavia

Yugoslavia did not disappear in the same moment in which the institutions of it have collapsed (Bieber 2014, 4). It is the war that broke it apart. Its new borders, new citizenships, new armies and new national narratives are the things that finished the job (Bieber 2014, 1). However, the social and cultural space which Yugoslavia had created did not vanish so neatly (Bieber 2014, 5). This is where the importance of the afterlife of Yugoslavia lies for this chapter. The previous parts have shown how it was created, stabilized, contested and destroyed. This final part will show that the ruins of it have continued to organize memory, identity and regional hierarchy after 1991 (Bieber 2014, 5). As Bieber (2014, 4) had argued in his *Debating the End of Yugoslavia*, Yugoslavia was more than just a state; it was an idea and a state as well. It may have stopped politically existing in 1991 or 1993, but as a cultural and social structure, it was only “severely weakened”, not erased (Bieber 2014, 5).

This afterlife too, was uneven. Slovenia was the one which had moved away the fastest (Djokić 2013, 68, 73). It had already started positioning itself as a Central European country, rather than a Balkan one (Zorić 2013, 89). Moreover, after its independence, it had become the first former Yugoslav republic which was fully integrated into Western institutions (Djokić 2013, 73). Slovenia had joined *NATO* in 2004 and *the European Union* in May of 2004 (Djokić 2013, 73). Croatia followed them, but slowly. Franjo Tuđman had died in *December of 1999*, and after that, Croatia had moved, much more clearly, toward the EU integration (Djokić 2013, 72). It had become an *EU candidate* in *June of 2004* and was expected to enter the union in 2013, which it succeeded at on *the 1st of July 2013* (Djokić 2013, 72-73). The path on which Serbia was on, was much more unstable. The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia had survived during the 1990s as a state which was composed of Serbia and Montenegro (Djokić 2013, 72). However, it was marked by the authoritarian rule of Milošević, war, sanctions, Kosovo, and delayed transition (Djokić 2013, 71-72). In *February of 2003*, it had been renamed Serbia and Montenegro. Nevertheless, that union did not last. Montenegro had declared its independence in May 2006 (Grubačić 2010, 38-39).

Kosovo then became the best example of the unresolved afterlife of Yugoslavia. After the *NATO intervention of 1999*, Kosovo remained formally contested and internationally administered. UN envoy, *Martti Ahtisaari*, in 2007, proposed a plan for supervised independence (Grubačić 2010, 114). That plan was welcomed by the Kosovo Albanians and was rejected by Serbia (Grubačić 2010, 140). Kosovo too had declared its independence in 2008, which was called illegal by Serbia, while the *United States, United Kingdom, Germany, France and Italy* have recognized its independence (Djokić 2013, 72). Some of the other states, *including Russia, Spain, China and India*, they did not (Djokić 2013). What this means is that the breakup was not finished with the wars of the 1990s. It was prolonged through international law, politics of recognition, EULEX, supervision of NATO, clashes in Mitrovica and competing claims to sovereignty (Grubačić 2010, 40).

Bosnia and Herzegovina were still the ones carrying the heaviest institutional burden of the Yugoslav wars. Dayton did succeed in ending the physical fighting in 1995, yet it had also created a state whose survival was dependent on a complicated structure of its entities, ethnic representation and international supervision (Djokić 2013, 72). Djokić (2013, 72) had noted that Bosnia had remained fragile even after. With its nationalist parties still enjoying support among all three main ethnic groups (Djokić 2013, 73). *Radovan Karadžić* had been arrested only in *July 2008*, and after him, *Ratko Mladić* was arrested in *May*, only after years of hiding (Djokić 2013, 73). These paths are already showing the hierarchy that would later matter for the “*Western Balkans*”. Slovenia left

the category almost immediately. Croatia gradually escaped it. Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Kosovo remain attached to it through the prism of war, weak institutions, contested sovereignty or delayed integration.

Despite all of the above, the afterlife of Yugoslavia was much more than only diplomatic or institutional. It had survived in memory, culture, language and ordinary habits (Bieber 2014, 5). In Djokić's (2013, 74) chapter "*The Past as Future*", he argues that Yugoslavia survives as "numerous, intertwined, individual and collective memories" often meeting in academic, cultural, business, athletic or personal encounters. Even in cyberspace (Djokić 2013, 74). Djokić (2013, 73-74) used Tim Judah's term "Yugosphere" to describe the networks that continued after the breakup of the state: shared language, music, food, fashion, mobility, business, media, and cultural exchange. This is important because it allows for the chapter to not end only on death and fragmentation. Yugoslavia did fail as a state, but the practices which were created inside of it have continued to circulate across its former borders (Djokić 2013, 74; Bieber 2014, 5).

The cultural legacy of Yugoslavia could especially be seen precisely because it had created more than just national cultures that were placed side by side (Milutinović 2013, 75). Milutinović (2013, 75) had argued that Yugoslavia produced a supranational cultural layer in which all of Yugoslavia had participated in. This included mandatory education, culture which was state funded, translations, partisan films, theatre, common media references and shared cultural institutions (Milutinović 2013, 78-79). The point that Milutinović (2013, 75) makes is not nostalgia. He is arguing that it is impossible to understand Yugoslavia only through looking at nationalist or anticomunist frameworks (Milutinović 2013, 75). The reasoning is that those approaches cannot explain why those people had lived together for as long as they did or what they had gained from that shared cultural space (Milutinović 2013, 75, 77). This idea fits directly into Toplak's (2026) interview: Yugoslavia was not only imposed from above. It was also through schools, army service, youth rituals, travel, culture and everyday contact (Toplak 2026).

However, memory was never innocent. The post-Yugoslav space had become full of competing memories. Memories of coexistence, memories of war, memories of socialism, memories of repression, memories of consumer abundance and memories of betrayal (Spaskovska 2014, 241). Spaskovska's (2014, 246) chapter in *Debating the End of Yugoslavia*, is important here because it is asking what happened to the 1,215,000 people who had declared themselves as "Yugoslav" in the 1981 census. This was an important number because it had shown that the Yugoslav identification was not simply invented later, by nostalgia (Spaskovska 2014, 247). That identification had existed socially before the collapse of the country (Spaskovska 2014, 249-250). However, after 1991, those identities had become difficult to place inside those new nations which were

built around Serb, Croat, Bosniak, Slovene, Macedonian or Montenegrin narratives (Spaskovska 2014, 242, 249).

The work that Patterson (2011, 17) did on the consumer culture of Yugoslavia helps to explain why that nostalgia had become so powerful. In the memory of many former Yugoslavs, that “*Good Life*” of the 1960s and 1970s was still connected to travel, shopping, resourcefulness, shortages that they had overcome together and a sense of shared normality (Patterson 2011, 5, 16, 324, 328). Patterson (2011, 324) had also noted that even when the people were remembering the failures of the Yugoslav consumer system, those failures could, and sometimes would, become part of affectionate memory. Going abroad to fill “the luxury gap”, managing shortages and being proud of one’s flexibility, all of them had become memories of shared experiences (Patterson 2011, 315, 324). The importance of this lies in the fact that Yugonostalgia was not just a sentimental longing for Tito. It was also the comparison between the insecurity of the post-Yugoslav transition and the remembered stability of that socialist life.

Concurrently, the wars had also changed how Yugoslavia was seen by the others on the outside. Grubačić (2010, 31) had argued that the term “*Balkan*” was barely used during the communist period. Then, the parts of the region were usually being absorbed into “Eastern Europe” or Cold War categories (Grubačić 2010, 31). However, after Yugoslavia had collapsed in 1991, the language and the use of the “*savage Balkans*” had returned (Grubačić 2010, 31). It had brought with itself that idea that Yugoslavia had been artificial and rooted in “dark Balkan origins” (Grubačić 2010, 31). This is where the bridge to the next chapter is. The collapse of Yugoslavia did not only create new states. It had revived an older external vocabulary of disorder, violence and incapacity.

What had once been called Yugoslavia had now become easier to describe as “*the Balkans*” again (Grubačić 2010, 31).

This is *where* and this is *why* the afterlife of Yugoslavia carries a direct connection to the birth of the modern term “Western Balkans”. The states that emerged from the failed state did not all carry the same label. Once Slovenia had integrated itself into the EU and NATO, it was able to present itself as Central European and already “European”. The later move of Croatia toward the same goal had moved it, gradually, out of the category. Concurrently, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia and Kosovo, all of them stayed and became associated, more deeply, with that post-conflict transition, international supervision, unresolved borders and delayed accession. Thus, the label that came out of it later was not only geographic. That label was produced by the unequal aftermath of Yugoslavia’s collapse. It was telling which states were seen as stable, which were seen as problematic and which still need to be managed from the outside.

Therefore, this chapter ends where the next one begins: with the transformation of Yugoslavia, a shared state, into a once again fragmented regional problem, and with the emergence of “Western Balkans” as the political name for that unfinished post-Yugoslav space.

Chapter 6: Birth of the Modern Term “Western Balkans”

Once the Yugoslav wars came to an end, the political landscape of that region had already fundamentally changed. Those states which were once living within a common political sphere had now been moving along different trajectories, and were redefining themselves through new political and institutional orientations even more. Concurrently, the language which was used to describe that region, it too was beginning to shift.

The broader term “the Balkans” had long ceased to function as only a geographical description. As the time passed, the term had increasingly started to carry associations with backwardness, instability and incomplete Europeaness. It had become embedded in broader systems of representation and political imagination (Todorova 2009, 194). The Balkans then began to increasingly function as a discursive category through which difference and otherness were explained, rather than operating as a regional designation (Bechev 2011, 66-67). There, representations were reinforced, even more, with the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the conflicts of the 1990s. It had reactivated those older assumptions surrounding violence and fragmentation in the region (Kolstø 2016, 1246-1252).

However, instead of continuing to use and rely on the existing regional terminology, the European Union gradually introduced a new category: the “*Western Balkans*”. This was more than simply a change in vocabulary. It was an attempt to reorganize and to politically manage a post-conflict space through a structure of stabilisation, regional cooperation and eventual integration into the European Union (Lika 2023, 8-9). Thus, this chapter will ask more than just when the term had appeared, and will, instead, ask why this category became necessary, who it is including, who it is excluding and what political function it was designed to serve.

6.1. From “The Balkans” to “The Western Balkans”

The collapse of Yugoslavia did not only destroy a state. It had also reopened a question of how this part of Europe was then to be named, ordered, understood and seen by the others. Once the end of the 1990s came, the region was already being described through war, fragmentation, ethnic violence, state failure and post-socialist transition. However, this vocabulary was not innocent. The term “*Balkans*” was already, at that point, carrying with itself a much longer symbolic burden. Todorova (2009, 194) had argued that, by the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, that word had become a pejorative. The word *Balkans* was associated with small, weak, dependent and semi-developed states. Those states were imagined as aggressive, intolerant, barbarian and semi-oriental (Todorova 2009, 194). Bechev (2011, 66) had similarly noted that the

“Balkan” label did not function as an objective identity. It was behaving more as a discursive phenomenon which was formed by popular perception, representations from the outside and the sheer politics of accepting or rejecting that label (Bechev 2011, 66). What this means is that, when the European Union started to speak of the “*Western Balkans*”, it had not come up with a label on neutral ground. It had attached a new institutional prefix to an older and already quite loaded geography.

It is precisely this where the importance of the shift from “the Balkans” to “the Western Balkans” lies. It was not simply a matter of making the map more precise. If the point of it was the precision. The European Union could have used “South Eastern Europe”, “former Yugoslavia plus Albania” or some other administrative phrase. What it had done instead is keep the word “Balkans”, but narrow it. Kolstø (2016, 1248) had noted that the official term was introduced at the Vienna European Council in 1998. It had become more common after Bulgaria and Romania were accepted as applicant countries in the following year (Kolstø 2016, 1248). Lika (2023, 1) had also noted that the European Union had introduced the notion of the Western Balkans for the first time in 1998. It had also distinguished those states from Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia and Greece, while Croatia was included, at first, until 2013 and its EU accession (Lika 2023, 2). This logic can also be seen in the Vienna European Council (1998) itself, as it shows the beginning of this narrative. It had placed the “Western Balkans” among the future common strategies of the EU, together with Russia, Ukraine and the Mediterranean region (European Council 1998). This was already an important move. The region was not being renamed as a cultural community, but rather as an object of European strategy.

Thus, the question then is not only *when* the term came to be, rather *why* it has become useful. It seems that the answer to this question lies in the political problem that the EU was being faced with after the Yugoslav wars. That region was too European for it to be treated as completely external. However, at the same time, that region was also too unstable and institutionally unfinished for it to be treated as if it were already belonging. The Balkans had to be brought closer, but also kept apart. Linguistically, that problem was solved with the “Western Balkans”. This language has allowed the EU to speak about inclusion without it giving immediate membership to the countries in the region. Concurrently, it had made a category for countries that were promised Europe, despite them still being managed as a separate post-conflict space. Lika (2023, 9) had argued that the term was conceived and institutionalised so that it could pinpoint, more precisely, the countries which were included in Stabilisation and Association Process. The conceptual change can be seen here. The *Balkans* were not only the symbolic other of Europe anymore; the *Western Balkans* became the administrative waiting room of it.

However, this does not mean that those older stereotypes have disappeared. They were rather reorganized. Bakić-Hayden and Hayden (1992, 4-5) had argued that the former Yugoslavia had already functioned as a space in which symbolic hierarchies of Europeanness were reproduced internally. Different groups were positioning themselves as more "European," while they were positioning the others as more eastern, southern or "Balkan" (Bakić-Hayden and Hayden 1992, 4-5). Later, Bakić-Hayden (1995, 917-918) had developed this argument through the concept of "*nesting orientalism*". Bakić-Hayden (1995, 917-918) was showing how distinctions between "Europe" and the "Balkans" were repeatedly recreated within the region itself. Each group was locating another group further east, and, therefore, further from an imagined Europe (Bakić-Hayden 1995, 917-918). This is explaining why this new category of the European Union could function so effectively. It had entered a political and symbolic landscape where the language of Europeanness, backwardness and distance from the Balkans had already become familiar. Thus, the EU did not need to construct these hierarchies from the beginning. Discussions of Kolstø (2016, 1250), on Europeanisation and de-Balkanisation, push in a similar direction. Becoming "European" in this discourse did not only mean to belong to Europe geographically. It rather meant moving closer to the EU and with that, adopting its political and legal standard (Kolstø 2016, 1250). Looking at it this way, Europeanness progressively became something that could be measured institutionally.

Slovenia and Croatia are imperative for the argument here as they are the ones that show that this category is not stable. Historically, Slovenia could be connected to Yugoslavia and to the broader Balkan or South-Eastern European space. However, it was not really placed inside this new and modern EU meaning of the Western Balkans. On the other hand, Croatia was understood and treated differently. Initially, Croatia too was counted within the Western Balkans. Yet, after their accession to the EU, it stopped appearing in the same category. Lika (2023, 11) had argued that the membership of Croatia in 2013 had shifted the border between the Western Balkans and the EU. Croatia had also stopped appearing in the European Commission's annual enlargement package as a Western Balkan country (Lika 2013, 11). This is another proof that the "Western Balkans" is not a "normal" regional name. Normal regions do not shrink every time a state fulfils an accession criterion. Yet, this one does precisely because it is tied to political status.

In that way, "Western Balkans" is a name that both includes and excludes, at the same time. It is including the region with saying that the future of it is European. However, it is also excluding it by making that Europe and its Europeanness conditional, delayed and supervised. This is made especially clear with the Stabilisation and Association Process. It had framed the region through stabilisation, transition, regional cooperation and preparation for future membership. Therefore,

the logic behind the term is not only descriptive. It is disciplinary. It is explaining the region as something that has to be transformed before it can fully belong. This is why Lika (2023, 7) is describing the concept as rather leaning more toward exclusion than inclusion. Even though the discourse of the EU is repeatedly promising that the future of the Western Balkans is *within* the EU (Lika 2023, 7). The promise is real; however, the distance is real too.

This is the point at which the language changes from geography into power. The European Union did not simply find the Western Balkans. It had helped to make it as a category. In the interview with Goran Svilanović, he makes this especially clear. He had said that, for him, the Western Balkans is a political category which is defined by the European Union and that, today, it means “*the six*” countries: *Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia* (Svilanović 2026). The way in which he had formulated it is important because it strips the term of any naturalness. If the meaning of the Western Balkans is “the six”, then that means that it is not a civilisational region, it is not a cultural destiny, nor is it a geographic term. It is rather a diplomatic formula that had become real because institutions, diplomats and policy documents kept on using it.

This conceptual shift is important for the thesis because the movement from “the Balkans” to “the Western Balkans” had not removed that old burden of Balkanism. Rather, it had made it more usable administratively. Those older “Balkans” had marked a space which was imagined as unstable and not quite European. This newer “Western Balkans” have marked a space that *could* be stabilized, that *could* be Europeanised and eventually absorbed. However, only after that space was kept separate long enough to be changed. Thus, the term exists between stigma and promise. It is saying to the region that yes, it does belong to Europe, but no, not yet. And exactly in that “not yet” is where the political meaning of the western Balkans is born.

6.2. Why Did the EU Create This Category?

The previous part has shown that the birth of the “Western Balkans” category was more so responding to a question of management, rather than that of identity. Once the end of the 1990s came, the European Union was being confronted with a practical problem. That problem was that the existing political system was no longer corresponding to developments that were happening in the region. The issue was more than simply that the states emerging from Yugoslavia had become independent. It was rather that they were moving at different paces, that they were faking different institutional conditions and that they were entering different relationships with the European Union. What came out of that is the need of the European Union for a system that could bring these states together while also keeping differentiation between them at the same time.

The existing labels, which were available at the time, did not solve this problem sufficiently. One of those was “*Former Yugoslav Republics*”. That one could not function because Albania was being increasingly connected to the same political and economic environment as the rest of the ex-Yugoslav states, despite never belonging to Yugoslavia in the first place (Jano 2008, 55-56). Concurrently, “*South Eastern Europe*” was institutionally too broad (Lika 2023, 9). At that time, Bulgaria and Romania had already moved into accession negotiations. Slovenia was following the path which was associated with Central European candidates rather than the post-conflict trajectory of the former Yugoslav space (Jano 2008, 56; Lika 2023, 9). Thus, the problem was not geographical inconsistency; it was institutional differentiation.

Jano (2008, 55-56) had argued that the Western Balkans were experiencing, what he had described as overlapping transformations, rather than a single, same, process of change. Concurrently, democratisation, economic transition, state-building and European integration were all developing at the same time (Jano 2008, 55, 57). However, they were often uneven (Jano 2008, 55-56). Compared to many of the Central and Eastern European states in which the transition was mostly focused on political and economic reform, countries in the Western Balkans were being confronted with unresolved questions of statehood, weak institutional structures, and post-conflict reconstruction at the same time (Jano 2008, 56-58). What this meant was that the enlargement could not be approached through the same mechanisms which were used elsewhere.

The outcome was that the EU started moving toward, what can be understood as, a regional approach. To avoid developing entirely separate systems for each state, it became more effective to create structures that could address those common challenges collectively. Bechev (2011, 46) had noted that the European Union has shown that it has a preference for regional approaches where geographical proximity creates overlapping political and economic concerns. Even though the cooperation could be organised regionally, the accession itself has stayed fundamentally individual (Bechev 2011, 46-47). That means that the countries are continuing to progress according to their own achievements and reform performances and not the regional ones (Bechev 2011, 47).

This difference is important because many of the problems which were, and still are, confronting the region extend beyond state borders. Bechev (2011, 95) had noted that the transport infrastructure throughout South East Europe had suffered from more than war damage. It had suffered through long-term fragmentation and neglect (Bechev 2011, 95). That weak cross-border infrastructure had progressively obstructed trade, mobility and broader economic development (Bechev 2011, 95-96). As a result of that, the post-conflict strategies for reconstruction slowly but surely shifted from isolated national projects to more regional initiatives, which were intended to reconnect the region physically and economically (Bechev 2011, 96).

Thus, regional cooperation had become institutionalised by the growing network of organisations and agreements. Bechev (2011, 49-55) noted that one of the earliest examples of this approach was the *Stability Pact for South East Europe*. It had later evolved into bigger mechanisms of cooperation (Bechev 2011, 49-55). Cooperation regarding transport had also expanded through initiatives such as the *South East Europe Core Regional Transport Network* and later proposals for a *Transport Community* (Bechev 2011, 98-99). Concurrently, energy cooperation became institutionalised through the *Energy Community*, which was to connect the Western Balkans directly to the wider European regulatory systems in areas like electricity and gas markets (Bechev 2011, 101-104).

This is important for this part of the thesis as it shows that these initiatives did not simply emerge spontaneously within the region itself. Bechev (2011, 152) had argued that it was precisely the EU that was the principal driver behind regional cooperation efforts. In other words, the EU was not only responding to the reality in the region, but it was also actively shaping, reshaping and organising one.

This process was further reinforced by financial mechanisms. The assistance of the EU increasingly moved through programmes like the *CARDS* and later the *Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA)*. Both of those were funded projects extending across borders and sectors (Bechev 2011, 98-99). These infrastructure projects, transport corridors and institutional reforms then became linked to bigger regional systems, and not only national priorities (Bechev 2011, 98-99). Therefore, funding did more than just support development. It had encouraged those states to exist and operate within a shared regional architecture.

The Stabilisation and Association Process then gave the institutional logic which was connecting all of these developments. The SAP became the framework through which political reform, economic development and regional cooperation were linked directly to the eventual EU accession (European Union SAP). One of the conditions for moving forward in the process was precisely the regional cooperation itself (Bechev 2011, 55). This also meant that participating in a common regional framework gradually became embedded within that same path toward integration into the European Union (Bechev 2011, 51, 60).

Lika's (2023 8-9) work supports this interpretation by showing that the EU had increasingly divided South East Europe according to assessments of institutional development and state-building capacity (Lika 2023, 8-9). Economides had argued similarly that the geographical proximity alone did not explain the grouping of these countries. The roles of troubled recent histories, delayed political and economic development and the political preferences of the EU itself, played an equally important role as the geographic proximity (Economides 2010, 116 cited in Lika 2023, 9).

Gradea (2025, 68-69) had reached a similar conclusion when describing the Western Balkans as a political, technical and geopolitical construct rather than it being a stable geographical reality (Gradea 2025, 68-69). Thus, the category was less functioning as only a description of a region that already exists and rather as a mechanism through which the EU could organize different policy instruments, around a specific group of states.

6.3. Who Belongs?

To only look at the map alone cannot answer the question of who belongs to the Western Balkans. If the term were geographical, then the answer would include Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, Croatia and Türkiye, and they all would have to be discussed in a much more consistent way. Instead, the category has always existed according to a political status. Lika (2023, 2) had argued that the EU's Western Balkans, in the beginning, distinguished certain states from Greece, Romania, Bulgaria and Slovenia. However, Croatia was included in the label until its accession to the EU in 2013 (Lika 2023, 2). Gradea (2025, 6) had made the same problem visible, but from another angle. Gradea (2025, 6) had noted that the term is not grounded in strict geographical criteria and that it is even including areas that fall within the central, not only western, part of the Balkan Peninsula (Gradea 2025, 6). Thus, the real boundary of the Western Balkans is not mountain, river, culture or history. It is the border between the membership to the European Union and non-membership.

Slovenia is the first important case. When looked at it from the historical point of view, Slovenia cannot simply be detached from Yugoslavia or from the broader South Slavic political space. However, it was not placed within the modern EU meaning of the Western Balkans. The question then becomes less about whether Slovenia was geographically part of the Balkans, but *why* Slovenia increasingly came to see itself outside of them.

Žižek (1999) had noted this process really well. In writing on Slovenian identity, Žižek noted how Slovenia was often positioning itself through an act of symbolic distancing. In it, the Balkans were imagined as beginning somewhere "further south", while Slovenia itself was moved into this imagined space of *Mitteleuropa* or Central Europe (Žižek 1999). In choosing not to become something completely different, Slovenia increasingly defined itself through what it was supposedly *not*. This does not mean that Slovenia had no connection to the Balkans. It means that the political and symbolic identity of Slovenia was rather built through escape from that label. This was a symbolic movement, not only a geographical one.

The interview with Toplak (2026) makes this argument even stronger because it introduces a Slovenian perspective from within the country, rather than from the outside. In her interview, Toplak (2026) had argued that historically, Slovenia did not define itself primarily through Balkan affiliation and that the issue had become politically important only during the 1980s amid the broader discourse of “returning to Europe”. She had noted that those narratives of independence were increasingly relying on a distinction between Slovenia and the Balkans. While Slovenia and Croatia were, at the same time, repositioned as belonging to the newly imagined category of Central Europe. A category which, as Toplak herself points out, “does not exist” geographically (Toplak 2026). This is suggesting that belonging was not discovered; it was made.

Both Toplak (2026) and Goran Svilanović (2026) both, argue in their interviews that the “Western Balkans” itself should not be understood as a geographical expression but a political one. Even describing it as a euphemism where being “Western” seems to imply being “slightly better than the Balkans themselves” (Toplak 2026).

However, Toplak (2026) is complicating the narrative of Slovenian separation by showing that Yugoslavia itself has stayed deeply embedded within Slovenian social and political identity. She is arguing that Yugoslavia has undergone, what she describes as, a process of rehabilitation within Slovenia. Toplak (2026) is pointing to concepts like “*silent Yugoslavia*” or “*dormant commons*”. With that, she is referring to social ties and forms of solidarity that still continue to survive beneath formal political divisions (Toplak 2026). Analytically, this is extremely important as it is suggesting that the departure of Slovenia from the Balkans was never complete in earnest. Politically and institutionally, Slovenia did move somewhere else; however, many cultural and historical connections are still present.

Thus, this creates an important contradiction. Slovenia could and did leave the Western Balkans politically. However, traces of Yugoslavia and its space still are socially and culturally embedded. Geography stayed the same. Historical experience did not disappear. However, what did change was the system through which these relationships were interpreted.

Croatia, however, is more complicated. Compared to Slovenia, it *did* belong to the Western Balkans, but then it did not anymore. This makes Croatia one of the most important cases for this thesis. In the beginning, Croatia was treated as a part of the Western Balkans; however, after it entered the European Union in 2013, it disappeared from the category in EU enlargement practice (Lika 2023, 12). Lika (2023, 12) had noted that Croatia does not show up in the annual enlargement package of the European Commission or in Council conclusions as a Western Balkan country. What that is showing is that the category is changing depending on the political status of a country, rather than its geography or history. Gradea (2025, 7) had made the same point when arguing that

the accession of Croatia showed how the term loses its relevance once a state becomes a member of the European Union. Croatia is then seen and understood, primarily, as a member and a part of the Union, rather than as a part of the Western Balkans (Gradea 2025, 7). It is exactly this where geography stops explaining anything. Croatia did not move on the map in 2013, nor did its history change. The language of the people, legacies of the war and its connections to both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, none of those have disappeared. However, what has changed is its institutional status.

Despite the EU argument, the Case of Croatia is not only important because of its accession. It is also important because Croatia itself had long been trying to escape that Balkan label. Bechev (2011, 72) has shown that both, the Slovenian and Croatian elites who were pro-independence were justifying their cause through a desire to break away from that “Balkan” political change which was associated with Yugoslavia, and with it, Serbia. They wanted to “return to Europe” (Bechev 2011, 72). In the case of Croatia, this distancing was especially visible under the leadership of Franjo Tuđman. Tuđman was interpreting Yugoslavia as a state which was being dominated by the “Byzantine” Serbia and, at the same time, as something that had, allegedly, separated Croatia from its authentic cultural and historic roots (Bechev 2011, 72). What this is showing is that this separation of Croatia was not only something which was simply done by Brussels from the outside. This separation was also a precise fit for a longer Croatian political project of repositioning the country as *Central European*, *Mediterranean* and *European*, rather than Balkan.

Concurrently, Croatian separation was not as cleanly done as the one of Slovenia. The war in which Croatia was a part of, the Serbian minority living in the country, its border and the questions of refugees and the relationship it had with Bosnia and Herzegovina, all of these kept Croatia tied to that regional file of post-Yugoslavia. Bechev (2011, 166-167) has shown this chronologically, as in 2003, Croatia was still participating in regional initiatives. It had applied for the EU membership in February, it had joined *CEFTA* in March, it had signed the *Adriatic Charter* with Albania and Macedonia in May, and it had taken part in the EU-Western Balkans summit at Thessaloniki in June (Bechev 2011, 166-167). In that same year, the presidents of Serbia and Montenegro and Croatia shared mutual apologies for the atrocities that had been committed during the wars that had happened in the 1990s. That again had shown that the path to the EU, which Croatia was taking, was developing and growing alongside some of the regional reconciliation issues which were unresolved (Bechev 2011, 167). In 2004, Croatia reached the status of a candidate country. In 2005, it had been invited to start the negotiations relating to the membership of the EU. However, these steps that they had taken did not remove Croatia from the regional system (Bechev 2011, 167). Thus, Croatia was both inside and outside at the same time. It had been institutionally

moving toward the EU; however, it had been still politically tied to the context of the Western Balkans. This is why it works really well to compare Croatia to Slovenia in this part. Slovenia had been mostly excluded from the Western Balkans from the start. The reasoning for that is that they were simply on a different EU trajectory. Yet, Croatia was still passing through the category. It *had* been treated as a part of the Western Balkans; however, once it had entered the EU, it had “graduated” out of it. Svilanović (2026) is supporting this in his interview from the perspective of diplomatic practice. When he was asked whether he would include Slovenia and Croatia in the Western Balkans, his answer was that he would not. The reason behind this was firstly that for him, the term today means the six countries and nothing more, and secondly, because Slovenia and Croatia, on their path to the EU, have proven themselves as more open to the visions of the EU than the rest of the Western Balkans six (Svilanović 2026). His answer is revealing as it shows that the belonging of Croatia is less decided by the older histories of the same country, cultural closeness or geography, but more so by the today's diplomatic use of the term.

With its case, Croatia is proof of the instability of the Western Balkan category.

Slovenia had shown that its history in Yugoslavia is not enough to place it in the modern category of the EU's making. Comparatively, Croatia has shown that a state *can* be *inside* that category at one moment and that it can be *outside* in another without its borders moving or without the loss of regional connection. What this means is that the Western Balkans is not only a label that is attached to a place. It is a category, a label from which a state can “graduate” out of, or rather, exit politically.

The cases of Romania and Bulgaria are also important to mention because both of those countries are *geographically* and *historically* connected to the Balkans. However, once their path to the EU became different, that automatically separated them from the Western Balkans. Şafak (2025, 1-2) had argued that the term Western Balkans showed up as a category of the EU, for states which were outside of the Union, while the Balkan states that became members of the EU had stopped being treated as Balkan in the same political sense. Tulun (2017, 1) had made this more polemically while arguing that, according to the logic of the European Union, Croatia, Bulgaria, Romania and Greece are no longer part of the Balkans because they are members of the EU; however, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia stay as the “Western Balkans”. Even though the tone that Tulun had used in his argument is more so critical than institutional, his point is analytically useful: the category works through political sorting.

Greece, too, is an example of this contradiction. The geography of Greece *is* Balkan, and it is central, historically, to many European imaginations of the region. However, Greece too is not a part of the Western Balkans as it has been an EU member for a long time. Žižek (1999) is capturing

this paradox really well. He is writing that the Balkans are always located somewhere else, “a little bit more to the southeast”, until one reaches Greece (Žižek 1999). Greece suddenly escapes the label because it is imagined as the cradle of Western civilisation (Žižek 1999). This is not just a joke about geography. This label seems to be moving away from the ones who have enough, either symbolic or institutional capital, or both, to escape it.

An uncomfortable case here would be the case of Türkiye. The exclusion of it shows the bigger politics of the word “Balkan”. Tulun (2017, 1) had argued that the construction of the Western Balkans, done by the EU, separated Türkiye from the rest of the Balkan enlargement discussion. It had left it in an undefined “Eastern Balkans” position (Tulun 2017, 1). The logic that Şafak (2025, 1) is using here is that if “Western Balkans” exists, then, logically, an “Eastern Balkans” should also exist. Yet, this absence of a stable category is showing the political character of the naming itself (Şafak 2025, 1). This is important to note, as the case of Türkiye is exposing the artificiality of the whole structure. If belonging were based on geography, then Türkiye could not be simply pushed outside of the conversation. However, if it is being based on the strategy of the EU, then this exclusion becomes much more easy to explain.

The deeper issue here is that the EU category did not erase those older forms of Balkan identity. It had cut across them. Bryce and Čaušević (2019, 2) are arguing that Europe has, for a long time now, had difficulty integrating its Ottoman-Islamic heritage into its own understanding of Europe. Even though that heritage has been historically embedded in places like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Macedonia (Bryce and Čaušević 2019, 2). Why their point is important here is because it is showing why the boundaries of the Western Balkans cannot be understood only through Brussels documents. This category is also touching those older anxieties relating to which histories are even allowed to be counted as European. It is, very obviously, possible for a country to be a part of Europe geographically, for it to be entangled culturally with Europe and also historically central to it, yet still be treated as not quite belonging.

This is also where Balibar and Bjelić (2003) help to explain the broader problem more sharply. Bjelić (2003, 9-10), drawing on Balibar, had argued that Europe is behaving through a paradox of borders. It is claiming universal inclusion while it, at the same time, is producing internal lines of exclusion (Bjelić 2003, 9-10). This paradox can be especially seen in the Balkans as the region is not outside of Europe in the way a distant colony might be. However, it is the internal borderland of Europe (Bjelić 2003, 10). Precisely this is why the Western Balkans can be treated as European enough to be promised accession and still separated enough to be put in its own, special category. It is not outside of the European story. Yet, it is the part of the story that Europe keeps administratively unfinished.

Another layer to this problem is added by Goldsworthy (1998). She had shown that the Balkans have long been turned into a space of European imagination. In it, the literature of the West and its popular culture have produced and invented Balkan-like places and have projected onto them instability, exoticism and political backwardness (Goldsworthy 1998, 202-212). The importance of this lies in the fact that the Western Balkans did not enter the EU discourse as an empty geographical field. It had entered a long history in which the region was already available as a stage for the projection of other peoples. This category of the EU might be administrative; however, it is not free from that older imaginative geography.

Therefore, the question of “*who belongs?*” does not have a stable answer. The reasoning for that is that the category itself is unstable. Based on everything written in this part of the chapter, the Western Balkans, then, is not where the Balkans are. It is rather where the EU border had not yet been overcome.

Chapter 7: Contemporary Geopolitical Context

The previous chapters have shown that the Balkans have rarely existed as a politically neutral term or a self-defined space. The region was, rather, constantly emerging, at an intersection of external interests, political projects and competing visions which were imposed by actors who were larger than itself. As Maria Todorova (1994, 454-455) had argued, the Balkans had gradually become constructed as a distinct political and cultural category. They were formed through external representation rather than only through their own internal realities (Todorova 1994, 454-455). Even though those historical actors have changed, the bigger dynamics did not disappear. If the previous centuries were witnessing the influence of empires and great powers, this contemporary period shows the influence of supranational institutions, strategic partnership and geopolitical competition. Thus, the questions stop being about where the Western Balkans begin and where they end, and it starts being about who has the authority to define it.

7.1. The European Union: Membership, Conditionality and Waiting

The European Union is the most important actor in the contemporary construction of the Western Balkans as it is the actor that defines its present political meaning. As mentioned before, that term does not simply describe a place. It is rather describing a group of states that are imagined as European, but they are not yet fully inside the political, legal and institutional space of Europe. Precisely this is why the role of the European Union has to also be understood as a politics of naming and not only through its foreign policy, enlargement policy or economic assistance. As mentioned before, Lika (2023, 1-2) had argued that the concept of the Western Balkans was created and institutionalized by the EU, for it to be able to designate the countries which are included in the Stabilization and Association Process. However, it had also created a form of exclusion because the countries that became members of the European Union stopped being treated as Balkan in the same political sense, all the while those who were left on the outside stayed labelled as the Western Balkans (Lika 2023, 1-2). Kolstø (2016, 1246-1248) had also argued this in a similar way by stating that the “Balkan” label became progressively attached to the countries that are outside of the EU. Concurrently, that membership to the European union itself, it is behaving almost as an exit ticket from the stigma of being Balkan (Kolstø 2016, 1246-1248). Thus, the EU is not only granting a path out of the Western Balkans. It is keeping the very category from which that exit is promised at the same time.

One of the most important moments in this contemporary story was Thessaloniki in 2003. At the Western Balkans Summit, the European Union had stated that it had given “unequivocal support” to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries and it had also declared that “the future of the Balkans is within the European Union” (EU-Western Balkans Summit 2003, 2). Particularly this sentence was important as it had turned the region from a post-war security problem into a future enlargement possibility. Thessaloniki had given recognition, hope, future and direction. It had suggested that Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, North Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro and Kosovo, under the framework of Resolution 1244, were not on the outside of Europe forever. It had suggested that they were rather waiting to be incorporated into it. The Stabilisation and Accession Process was presented as the structure of this European course, “all the way to their future accession” (EU-Western Balkans Summit 2003, 2-3). Concurrently, it was an anchor for the change in the Western Balkans in the same way that accession had worked for Central and Eastern Europe (EU-Western Balkans Summit 2003, 2-3). Examining it this way, Thessaloniki was more than merely a diplomatic declaration. It had been the moment when the European Union gave that region a promise. However, it had also placed that promise behind conditions.

Concurrently, it is precisely this where the contradiction actually began. That same text which had promised the future in Europe had also placed the speed of movement “in the hands of the countries of the region”. It had linked the progress to the Copenhagen criteria and the conditions of the Stabilisation and Association Process (EU-Western Balkans Summit 2003, 2-3). This looks fair on paper. What is meant is that each country would be moving according to its own merits. Yet, in practice, the promise became more and more stretched over time. The one and only success story of Thessaloniki so far is Croatia. They had applied for the membership to the EU in 2003, became a candidate in 2004, opened negotiations in 2005, concluded them in 2011 and joined the European Union in 2013 (Ognjanoska 2022, 834). Concurrently, the other states stayed in different versions of waiting.

North Macedonia applied for the EU membership in 2004 and became a candidate in 2005 and they have not, even years later, experienced the same movement. Montenegro opened negotiations in 2012 and Serbia did also in 2014 and both of those processes also became much longer and slower than that of Croatia. Albania had become a candidate in 2014, Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2022, much later than the others, and Kosovo stayed even more constrained as its status itself stayed politically contested (Ognjanoska 2022, 834-835). Therefore, the category “Western Balkans” is also connected to something other than geography or post-Yugoslavia. It became connected to *waiting*.

This waiting, it is not passive. It is governing the region. The conditionality of the European Union is perpetually moving between promise and postponement. There is always that promise of “reward”, but it is delayed. There is always a next step to be taken, but it comes with another condition. There is always progress, but that progress can be blocked.

This contradiction can best be seen in the case of North Macedonia. As Couteau et al. (2024, 7) had argued, North Macedonia had become one of the best examples of the difficulties that the European Union has in its conducting of the enlargement policy. That is because the accession process of this country had become, more and more, molded, not only by institutional reforms, but also by the questions of language, history and identity (Couteau et al. 2024, 7). The progress of North Macedonia was at first being blocked by Greece through the long-standing dispute over the constitutional name. (Couteau et al. 2024, 7-8). Later, Bulgaria had also raised their own objections regarding historical interpretation and questions regarding national identity (Couteau et al. 2024, 7-8). Brunnbauer (2022, 724-726) had also similarly argued that the veto of Bulgaria effectively managed to change issues of history and identity into conditions of accession. Thus, it had added additional requirements which were going beyond the traditional framework of enlargement criteria (Brunbauer 2022, 724-726). The importance of the North Macedonian case went beyond the country itself. North Macedonia had accepted politically, quite difficult compromises through the Prespa Agreement (Couteau et al. 2024, 7-8). It had changed its constitutional name under the expectation that that concession would manage to produce tangible movement toward the EU membership (Couteau et al. 2024, 7-8). However, other issues were born afterwards. The importance of this is not only in the fact that one country was experiencing difficulties, but because of the bigger message that those developments had sent out throughout the region. During the interview with Goran Svilanović (2026), he had raised precisely this issue when he was answering the questions regarding the perception of enlargement in the Western Balkans. He had pointed out that from the perspective of other states that were observing these happenings in North Macedonia, an inevitable question had emerged: if North Macedonia changed its name and still stayed outside of the Union, what exactly are the other countries expected to believe regarding the reliability of the accession process itself (Svilanović 2026).

Therefore, the issue had become that of credibility. Conditionality is able to function only if countries believe that fulfilling conditions will actually produce visible political movement. Thus, once that connection between effort and reward becomes uncertain, the trust which should be had in the process itself begins to weaken.

The political consequence of these events in the case of North Macedonia is quite visible. Couteau and others (Couteau et al. 2024, 2-3) had shown that the failure of the then ruling party

in North Macedonia, SDSM, to deliver EU progress after making those controversial compromises on national identity issues had brought about its defeat in the 2024 elections. Another political party, VMRO-DPMNE, had gained support by showcasing itself as the defender of ethnic Macedonian identity and pride, against sacrifices that were made on the path to the European Union (Couteau et al. 2024, 2-3). This example is extremely important for this thesis as it is showing that the conditionality of the EU is not only institutional. It also enters the emotional and identity life of the country and the region itself. It is asking people to believe that if they change enough, reform enough, compromise enough and, in the end, wait long enough, that they will, eventually, be accepted. However, if that acceptance does not arrive, then the promise starts to produce its opposite. It begins to produce frustration, nationalism, distrust and a feeling that Europe is, once again, defining the region from above.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a representation of another example of contradiction within contemporary enlargement policy. When Russia had invaded Ukraine, that had reinvigorated discussions concerning enlargement and generated new political momentum surrounding the candidacy of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bechev 2024). Despite that, internal fragmentation of the country and continuing political schism are still major obstacles to the progress of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bechev 2024). In the interview with Josip Brkić (2026), he had similarly described Bosnia and Herzegovina by saying that it exists in a prolonged state of waiting. Brkić had argued that the country effectively stayed in the European waiting room for more than two decades despite EU membership continuing to represent one of its principal foreign policy objectives (Brkić 2026). Concurrently, when he was asked about the meaning of the Western Balkans politically today, he had described it as “nedovršeni posao” or rather as “unfinished work” of EU enlargement. He even said that the region is functioning like the “kitchen garden” of the EU, meaning something close to the Union, dependent on it, expected to be integrated, but still not truly inside (Brkić 2026). Brkić (2026) also says that the EU itself coined and galvanised the term, despite the earlier language of “Southeast Europe” having been more common through the Stability Pact. This is another example of the political tension of the label. “Southeast Europe” sounds geographical and broader, while the “Western Balkans”, comparatively, sounds administrative and unfinished. However, in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the waiting room is more than symbolic. In this case, it is connected to sovereignty, the Office of the High Representative, foreign judges in Constitutional Court, constitutional paralysis, entity politics and the constant international management of the state.

This feeling of frustration could also be visible in the interview done with Valentin Inzko (2026). While speaking about the European path on which Bosnia and Herzegovina is on, Inzko

(2026), similarly to Brkić (2026), pointed out that the country received a membership perspective at the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003. However, more than twenty years have passed, and the promise has not yet been fulfilled (Inzko 2026). Inzko (2026) had also remarked that a promise loses much of its meaning when the fulfilment of it is constantly pushed further into the future. The point here is not simply about time; it is about credibility. For him, the problem is that the perspective of the European Union has remained present in the political debate for decades now, while the progress which is tangible has been considerably slower.

This pattern can be seen throughout the region as well. Montenegro is the most advanced candidate country and is therefore carrying significance past its borders. Montenegro's negotiations began in 2012 and have continued for more than a decade (Ognjanoska 2022, 835). However, its importance extends past technical negotiations. In the interview with Goran Svilanović (2026), he spoke of how the eventual accession of Montenegro would carry great symbolic importance for the entire region because it would show that the enlargement is still a realistic political outcome rather than being an indefinitely postponed promise.

Without examples of successful movement through the current system, enlargement is at risk of becoming more and more distant and politically abstract.

Albania, similarly to Montenegro, is a representation of an enlargement process which is tangible. Recent assessments have suggested possible accession around 2029, which is creating the impression that enlargement may still be possible (European Western Balkans 2025). Concurrently, the progress that Albania is making is also showing the change in the policy of the EU. Steinbach (2024, 4-6) had argued that developments, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, have transformed enlargement from primarily technical process, into a geopolitical necessity. Therefore, Bačan (2021, 34-35) had argued that the Western Balkans should be understood less as a fixed geographical reality and more as a political construction whose significance changes according to wider political interests and external priorities. Thus, Albania is an example of how the movement toward the EU increasingly depends on not only the reforms in the region itself but also on political developments that are happening outside of it. During the interview with Majlinda Bregu (2026), she had also emphasised that Albania does not view Europe as something external that Albania must become a part of. They would rather see it as something to which Albania has always belonged and is only now looking for institutional recognition (Bregu, 2026). Bregu (2026) had also made the argument of Bačan (2021) that much stronger by also saying that the Western Balkans are functioning as a political construction whose importance changes depending on bigger political priorities. Concurrently, she is supporting the argument of this thesis by stating that the power to define the region stays outside of the region itself.

By contrast, Kosovo remains facing, quite possibly, the most structurally complex position among the Western Balkans six. Its questions of European integration are still interlaced with unresolved issues of recognition and sovereignty (Çipa 2023, 12-13).

Serbia is yet another example of the consequences of lengthy uncertainty. Contemporary analysis is describing Serbia as pursuing a strategy of “in-betweenness” (European Western Balkans 2025). Which would mean that it is maintaining, at the same time, its declared orientation towards Europe, while also keeping political and economic relations with actors such as Russia and China (European Western Balkans 2025). Rather than this being a simple representation of indecision, this is instead showing the geopolitical environment that is surrounding the Western Balkans. Steinbach (2024, 15-16) is arguing similarly that prolonged uncertainty when it comes to accession may unintentionally create more space for competing external actors. They could make their presence stronger and influence the region in a different way than that of the EU (Steinbach 2024, 15-16).

This all is also a good explanation of why the Western Balkans is not only a category of inclusion. It is a category of *controlled* inclusion. The European Union is insisting that the category belongs in Europe. However, it is, at the same time, creating means through which that belonging is postponed, measured and disciplined. Another good contemporary example is the *New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*. The Commission is stating that enlargement still is a key policy of the EU and that full membership to the EU for the Western Balkans is the Union's own political, security, and economic interest (European Commission 2023, 1). Especially after Russia's war against Ukraine (European Commission 2023, 1). Concurrently, that same document is showing how membership is being replaced, or at least supplemented, by partial access, economic incentives and conditional payments. The Growth Plan made a promise of a closer integration with the EU single market, regional economic integration through the Common Regional Market, acceleration of reforms and a new Reform and Growth Facility, which is worth EUR 6 billion (European Commission 2023, 2-3). However, that money is conditional on fundamental and socio-economic reforms (European Commission 2023, 2-3). To put it differently, the European Union had learned that the final reward is too far to remain politically convincing, so it is now offering pieces of membership before the membership itself.

At the same time, this does not mean that the New Growth Plan is empty or irrelevant. In actuality, it is very important because it is reorganising that economic convergence which has been too slow, and citizens need to feel the benefit of EU integration before accession (European Commission 2023, 1-2). The document is also recognising that the Western Balkans cannot simply be asked to wait forever, all the while the economies of the Western Balkans stay far below the

EU average. Yet, the logic is still the same: reform first, reward later. *The Reform Agenda* identifies priority reforms, turns them into qualitative and quantitative steps and uses them as payment conditions for the release of funds (European Commission 2023, 8-9). Even the money is structured as a carrot and stick. The European Union is not simply investing in the region. It is governing it through incentives.

All of this is why the metaphor of the “waiting room“ works well. However, it must be used in a conscious way. The Western Balkans is not waiting because nothing is happening. It is waiting through constant activity: reports, summits, roadmaps, screenings, chapters, clusters, reform agendas, visa regimes, bilateral disputes, annual packages, regional declarations and financial facilities. All of which are structuring the relationship of the region with the European Union (European Commission 2023, 1-3; Western Balkans Leaders Declaration 2020, 1-3).

This is not only one waiting room. It is a hierarchy within the waiting room itself. The bigger problem is that this hierarchy is confirming the argument of the thesis: the Western Balkans is more of a political condition than it is a stable region.

Croatia did not physically leave the Balkans in 2013. Slovenia did not stop sharing its Yugoslav history with the rest of those countries once it had entered the EU. Greece, Bulgaria and Romania did not become less Balkan in geographical terms because they are member of NATO or the European Union. What, however, had changed was their political classification. Turning back to Lika (2023, 1-2) and his argument that the Western Balkans concept does not primarily have a geopolitical or historical meaning. It rather has a political, geopolitical as well as a technical one (Lika 2023, 1-2). Concurrently, Kolstø (2016, 1246-1248) similarly showed that membership in the EU has become the pivot around which the Balkan/European distinction revolves. The reasoning behind this is that the states inside the European Union are treated as European, while the ones on the outside remain Balkan (Kolstø 2016, 1246-1248). All of this leads to the belief that the Western Balkans is not only the name of a region which is waiting to join Europe. It is the name of the states that Europe had not yet accepted.

7.2. Between the East and the West

This long wait for joining the European Union did not leave the Western Balkans empty. That “waiting room“ has opened political, economic and symbolic space for other actors to become more visible. At the same time, this does not mean that the region “turned away“ from Europe. It also does not mean that Russia, China, Türkiye or the United States have replaced the European Union as the dominant actor. The EU is still the most important institutional horizon for all of the Western Balkan six. However, the longer that wait for the EU is, the more the region is becoming

available for alternative forms of influence. By that it is meant the investment without the same level of conditionality, diplomatic supports without demands, security cooperation, media narratives and the political use of unresolved conflicts.

Precisely this is why the Western Balkans is far more than just an enlargement space. It is a space of strategic competition at the same time. Novaković (2025, 62) had argued that all of the Western Balkans six still wish to formally join the European Union. Yet, this accession process, which is slow and quite uncertain, makes the region that much more vulnerable to the influence of third actors who are participating in either stabilisation or destabilisation, which depends on their own interests (Novaković 2025, 62). The importance of this is not about just the presence of those other actors; it is also the weakness of the political space in which they are operating. Where the process of the European Union becomes slow, uncertain or inconsistent, that is where the other actors, not necessarily offering full alternatives to the EU membership, but still offering enough tools that local elites can use.

This change can be seen in the writings of Bieber and Tzifakis (2019, 5-6) quite clearly. Their argument is that the rationale for the enlargement of the European Union had changed. The reason for that being that the decision-making of the EU is being increasingly so, justified through the accession but not only through maintaining stability and democracy, also through the need to contain the influence of those other actors (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019, 5). The influence of those others is ranging from infrastructure investment and political support to media engagement and more covert forms of activity (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019, 5). This is leading to an understanding that the Western Balkans is, again, being discussed as a geopolitical space. Only now through railways, loans, pipelines, media, political parties, religious networks and security arrangements rather than only armies and borders.

This, return, so to say, of these key strategic competitions is also reviving an older problem, but in a new form. Applying the Work of Todorova here is useful because of her stating that the Balkans were historically imagined through the language of East and West. They were belonging and non-belonging, Europe and its internal “other”. Cufurović (2017, 43), drawing on Todorova (1994, 455), had argued that the Balkans were geographically inseparable from Europe but that they were, at the same time, constructed as its “other”. It had become a repository for negative characteristics against which a positive image of Europe could define itself (Cufurović 2017, 43). This older, symbolic geography is still important today. That region is not literally divided between the East and the West. Yet, it is unceasingly being interpreted through that binary. When Russia appeals to Slavic and Orthodox ties, when Türkiye invokes Ottoman-Islamic and cultural connections, when China starts offering itself as a pragmatic economic partner and when the

European Union and NATO use the language of democratic standards and security, the region of the Western Balkans becomes, once again, a place where the actors on the outside project their own visions of order.

However, to say that those external actors only “enter” the region from the outside, that would be too simple. Bieber and Tzifakis (2019, 10) had argued that the Western Balkans has long been a space where influences have been competing. It had also been a place where the local elites had learned to play different actors against each other (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019, 10). This is crucial for the argument of this thesis. The countries in the region are not only passive objects. Their leaders can, and are, using Russian support, the loans provided to them by the Chinese, Turkish diplomacy, American guarantees of security or even the Conditionality of the European Union itself. It all makes their own position stronger. Looked at it in this way, that strategic competition is not only imposed on the Western Balkans. It is also being used from within.

This vulnerability can be seen in the Hybrid CoE Trend Report (Smith and Juola 2020). The report is describing the Western Balkans as being, historically, marked by power politics. In the past, the great powers were competing for territory and influence. However, the report notes that today, that struggle is between the EU, the United States, NATO, Russia, China, Gulf actors and Türkiye. Each one of them with different strategies and different goals (Smith and Juola 2020, 8). Concurrently, the report is also emphasising that hybrid threats are especially important in places where democratisation is still ongoing and where geopolitical competition is creating openings for actors to exploit institutional weaknesses (Smith and Juola 2020, 9-10). This is also one of the reasons as to why the Western Balkans is so attractive to external actors. It is not because the region is naturally unstable. Not really. It is rather because of the delayed integration, weak rule of law, unresolved identity questions and institutions which are controlled by the elites. All of this is what is creating that unstable opening.

The European Union has, itself, added to this environment in contradictory ways. Grimm and Mathis (2015, 916-918) had argued that the assistance of the European Union to the Western Balkans, between 1991 and 2010, had put human aid, reconciliation and socio-economic development as a priority. While the democracy assistance had ranked only third in overall spending (Grimm and Mathis 2015, 916-918). Their point is not that the European Union did not do anything, rather that its actual financial priorities usually reflected stability and development more than democratic transformation. Out of this came that long-term contradiction. The European Union was speaking in and using the language of democracy and the rule of law; however, it had usually funded and managed the region through the logic of post-conflict stabilisation before those two (Grimm and Mathis 2015, 930-941). This earlier pattern is important when we look at today because those

external actors are now functioning in political systems where those democratic institutions are still fragile, state capture is persistent, and change can usually exist more so on paper rather than in practice.

Concurrently, Semenov (2025, 3-4) had brought this into the contemporary context of enlargement. Semenov (2025, 3-4) had argued that the leverage that the European Union has in the Balkans had been weakened because of the geopolitical enlargement, rival powers, bilateral vetoes, EU “permacrises” and the preference for stability over democracy. These factors have made the accession less credible and less determinate (Semenov 2025, 3-4). There is a direct connection to strategic competition here. That is, if the European Union cannot convincingly link reform to reward, the other actors will not have to replace the EU. They will only need to make themselves more useful than the EU in the meantime.

7.2.1. Russia

This is where the case of Russia comes in. Its role can be best seen in Serbia, Republika Srpska (entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina) and parts of Montenegro and North Macedonia. However, the influence that the Russians have should not be looked at and understood as them being a full alternative to the European Union. Compared to the European Union, Russia is not offering the Western Balkans an institutional future that is realistic. Their strength is rather in them keeping the region politically unresolved. Bieber and Tzifakis (2019, 6) had noted that Russia has used cultural and religious affinities, diplomatic obstruction, party links, energy influence and media outlets like Sputnik and RT (Russia Today) to exercise influence in the region. Čančar (2022, 2) had similarly argued that Russia, together with China, managed to establish an influence which can compete with NATO engagement. Concurrently, the slow Euro-Atlantic integration and the weak strategic engagement of the European Union had created space for them to root their presence even more (Čančar 2022, 2-3). This is making Russia more of a spoiler of the existing Western order rather than a builder of a new regional order.

This distinction is important for the argument of this thesis. Russia does not really have a need to “name” the Western Balkans in the same way that the European Union does. Despite that, it is still benefiting from the fact that the category remains unfinished. The RE-ENGAGING (Daniel et al. 2024) report is making this very clear. The report is arguing that the agenda of Moscow in the Western Balkans is aimed at obstructing the integration of the European Union and NATO, rather than establishing a Russian hegemon in the region (Daniel et al 2024, 7-8). To put it differently, the influence of Russia in the region is

dependent on delay, disillusionment and unresolved questions of the status of the region. An example of this is Kosovo. In it, the support that Russia is providing Serbia regarding territorial claims gives Moscow leverage through the UN Security Council (Cuppuleri and Velju Ashiku 2024, 770-773). Additionally, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the leadership of Republika Srpska constantly uses the support of Russians as a counterweight to the pressures coming from the West (Cuppuleri and Velju Ashiku 2024, 765-770). The analysis of the Russian hybrid warfare that Karčić (2024, 1, 7-8, 12-13) has done argues, in a similar way, that Moscow is operating through proxy actors, media influence, nationalist narratives and the exploitation of institutional weaknesses. Rather than through projects of open integration (Karčić 2024,1).

Cuppuleri and Velju Ashiku (2024, 765, 769-773) are adding an important layer here. They are arguing that the soft power of Russia in the Western Balkans is not reducible to propaganda or nostalgia (Cuppuleri and Velju Ashiku 2024, 765, 769-773). They are wiring how it is working through a combination of values and interests: sovereignty, non-interference, anti-NATO sentiment, multipolarity, Orthodox and Slavic symbolism, administration for strong leadership and political support that is transactional (Cuppuleri and Velju Ashiku 2024, 765, 767-773). Precisely this is why the appeal of Russia can be emotionally very powerful. Even when its material capacity is quite limited. For some of the actors in the region, Russia is not appearing as a model to join, it is rather showing up as a useful patron that is validating their resistance to that conditionality of the West. This can also be directly connected to the points that Balibar (2004) and Bjelić (2003) had made on the borders of Europe. Balibar (2004, 3-6) had argued that the Balkans showcase the contradictions of the inclusion and exclusion of the European Union. The reasoning behind that is that the region is treated as being both, on the inside and on the outside of the political community of Europe (Balibar 2004, 3-6). Bjelić (2003 1, 9-10) had similarly argued the Balkans as a mirror of Europea. As a space onto which Europe is projecting its own unresolved questions of borders, identity and sovereignty (Bjelić 2003, 10). Russian position is exactly in that contradiction. It is not, and it does not have to pull the region in the direction of the east. What it instead has to do it to only show that the promise of the Europea is conditional, slow and unstable. In that sense, where the influence of the European Union is weaker, that is where the influence of Russia is the strongest.

Therefore, Russia is important for this thesis, and not because it is replacing Europe, rather because it is exposing how unfinished the Western Balkans still are as a European political space.

7.2.2. *China*

The case of China is different from that of Russia. Compared to Russia, China is not relying on an Orthodox, Slavic or anti-Western identity narrative. Concurrently, it is not presenting itself as a civilisational protector. The influence that China brings to the table is more so economic, infrastructural and centred around the elite. Bieber and Tzifakis (2019, 7) had argued that the engagement that China has with the Western Balkans is mainly built through loans and investments that the Chinese are making in transport infrastructure, energy, mining and heavy industry. One of the examples is a project like the Belgrade-Budapest railway and the Bar-Boljare highway which is linking the region with bigger Chinese trade routes toward Europe (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019, 7). A similar argument was made by Ivanković (2022, 143) in saying that the Western Balkans do matter for China because of its geographic position, as a gateway to Europe. The Belt and Road Initiative gives Beijing a system through which it can connect infrastructure, trade and political influence at the same time (Ivanković 2022, 131). Looking at it this way, same as Russia, China does not need, nor is it trying to redefine, the Western Balkans. Its way of entering the region is through roads, railways, power plants, mines, loans and construction contracts.

China is just as important for the argument of this thesis as Russia is, because its influence also is working through the weakness of the unfinished EU integration. Daniel et al. (2024, 26) had argued that the investments of the Chinese are concentrated in strategic sectors like the infrastructure, energy and natural resources. At the same time, they are being financed through Chinese state-owned banks, and they are being carried out by the Chinese state-owned companies (Daniel et al. 2024, 26). What these projects are producing is leverage. They are giving China access to transport corridors, energy systems and natural resources, which are not only regionally important. They are connected to the market of the European Union at the same time (Daniel et al. 2024, 25-26). Concurrently, Daniel et al. (2024, 25-26) had argued that China still is far behind the European Union as an overall economic actor. In 2021, the European Union accounted for 81 per cent of the Western Balkans' exports and 58 per cent of imports. Comparatively, China had stayed much behind in both of those categories (Daniel et al 2024, 25-26).

The biggest example of this pattern is Serbia. In the study on Serbia as the preferred partner of China, the edited volume of Jureković (2021, 132-133) shows that Serbia is the one which stands out the most in the Western Balkans when it comes to its relationship

with China. The reasoning behind that is its political, economic, security and cultural relations with one another. Shared narratives against the West after the 1999 intervention of NATO, China not recognising Kosovo and the “Corona diplomacy” of Beijing, all of them make this relationship between these two countries that much stronger (Jureković 2021, 132-133). Serbia had also become the main target of Chinese investments and loans in the region. That would also include projects in heavy industry, mining and infrastructure, while the purchase that China had made of RTB Bor copper facility and investment in Smederevo steelworks also had given Beijing a direct role in strategic sectors of the economy of Serbia (Jureković 2021, 133-134). Yet, even here the EU still is the most important economic partner of Serbia. That is, once again, showing that the influence of China is not passed on to them, replacing the European Union. It is rather more focused on giving local elites another source of money, visibility and diplomatic room for manoeuvre (Jureković 2021, 133-134, 138).

The cases of other Western Balkan countries, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania are showing why this influence is politically sensitive. Daniel et al. (2024, 27-28) had described the A1 motorway in Montenegro as one of the most infamous projects, which is backed by the Chinese. The reason behind that is that this project is one of the most expensive highways per kilometre in the world, and it has simultaneously increased the debt of the country (Daniel et al. 2024, 27-28). The Kičevo-Ohrid highway in North Macedonia had also become the country's largest and most expensive infrastructure project. The criticism here was being focused on the lack of transparency (Daniel et al. 2024, 27-28). In Republika Srpska the Banjaluka-Prijedor highway had also been under criticism because it had included, not only the costs of construction but it had also included a long concession for the Chinese company to operate the road with annual payment from the government (Daniel et al. 2024, 27-28). Other examples to which Ivanković (2022, 141) points, are the energy projects of China in Bosnia and Herzegovina which are including Tuzla Block 7, Banovići, Kamengrad, Gacko 2 and Stanari. These examples are important as they have brought up questions about debt, environmental standards, coal dependency and with it, compatibility with the energy rules of the European Union (Ivanković 2022, 141). With this, it can be seen that the presence of the Chinese is anything but abstract. It is entering right there where the governance is weak. In it, contracts are opaque and political elites of those countries can and are presenting big projects as development while, at the same time, avoiding the much stricter language of the EU change.

With this, it can be seen that the attractiveness of China is different than the one of Russia. Yet, it is no less important. While Russia is benefiting from political disputes which are not resolved, China took the route of the need in the region for fast infrastructure, investment and development which can actually be seen. Looking at the work done by Bieber (2018) on stabilitocracies is quite useful here. His work is showing how the leaders of the Western Balkans usually keep external legitimacy while, at the same time, they consolidate domestic power through informal networks and those weak institutions (Bieber 2018, 178-183). Why the investing of the Chinese fits into this is because it is usually functioning through elite-level agreements, limited transparency and state-to-state arrangements. This is where the importance of China for this thesis lies: the Western Balkans is, once again, shaped by the actors from the outside, but differently in the sense that it is not through occupation or formal rule this time around. In the case of China, it is being done through infrastructure, debt, strategic dependency and bargains that the elite is making in a region that is still in the waiting room of the European Union.

7.2.3. *Türkiye*

The last example of the outside power and its influence in the Western Balkans for this thesis will be the case of Türkiye. This case will be different in the sense that it does not work the same way that the cases of China and Russia do. It differs in the way that it is not a spoiler like Russia is, nor is it only an infrastructure actor like the Chinese. Türkiye works through a mix of history, culture, religion, diplomacy, trade, media and personal political relationships. The Hybrid CoE report done by Smith and Juola (2020) had noted that the way that Türkiye sees the Balkans is more through a neutral sphere of influence. The reasoning for that being the historical, cultural and religious ties (Smith and Juola 2020, 9). The report also underlines that the engagement of Türkiye is not only with the majority Muslim communities. Ankara has expanded investments and diplomatic activity more broadly across the whole of the region (Smith and Juola 2020, 9). The example of Türkiye as an outside actor is important for this thesis as it is showing that the old imperial memories do not simply disappear. They are reactivated in contemporary ways. Türkiye did not return to the Balkans as it once was, the Ottoman Empire. However, it had returned by using that Ottoman memory, Islamic institutions, cultural diplomacy and economic presence so that it can showcase itself as a familiar and also legitimate actor in the region.

Bieber and Tzifakis (2019, 6-7) are showing this through Türkiye's use of TİKA, the Yunus Emre Foundation, Diyanet, TRT and Anadolu Agency. All of which makes the

influence of Türkiye that much greater through these projects of restoration, language and culture, religious education and media presence (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019, 6-7). Vračić (2016, 13-14) had argued how the Diyanet is playing a really important role in keeping those religious relations with the countries in the Western Balkans. Concurrently, Turkish media and especially their television series also helped to reshape the perception of contemporary Türkiye, across the region (Vračić 2016, 13-14). The importance of this is in the fact that the soft power which Türkiye is practising here is not only functioning through official diplomacy. It is present in the everyday cultural life: mosques, schools, television, language centres, restoration of Ottoman sites, religious networks and popular culture. Looking at it this way, the influence that Türkiye has in the region is less direct than the one that Russia has, and it is also less material than the influence of China. However, it is socially much deeper in those places where the memory of the Ottoman-Islamic world still carries meaning.

Concurrently, the role of Türkiye is not only this. Its role is also that of a diplomatic actor, which is able to speak to different sides. An example of this is visible in the Serbia-Kosovo case (Cafiero 2023). In it, Türkiye had tried to put itself as a constructive and stabilising actor between those two countries (Cafiero 2023). Cafiero (2023) had also argued that the way in which Türkiye strived to expand its influence in the Balkans amid those Serbia-Kosovo tensions, while, at the same time, maintaining its relations with both of the parties. This dual position of Türkiye is what makes its case very important. It can appeal to Muslim communities in Kosovo, Bosnia, Albania and North Macedonia, while, at the same time, cultivating pragmatic relations with Serbia.

Ergo, Türkiye matters for this thesis as it is complicating the idea that the Balkans are being pulled between Brussels and Moscow. Türkiye is showing that the region is shaped through several historical and contemporary projects, which are overlapping at the same time. Ankara is not offering an accession akin to that of the European Union. However, it is offering recognition, memory, mediation, investment and cultural proximity (Vračić 2016, 13-14; Smith and Juola 2020, 9). Therefore, the influence of Türkiye works by reminding the region that Europe is not the only actor that is able to claim familiarity with it. In the same way as Russia and China, Türkiye is also benefiting through the unfinished nature of the Western Balkans but in a different way comparatively.

7.3. Beyond East and West

The choice of discussing the European Union, Russia, China and Türkiye is not just to show that many actors are present and are operating in the Western Balkans. On its own, that would not be enough. They are chosen to show that each one of these actors is using the unfinished position in which the region is in, in many different ways. It is here that the insights of Todorova (2009) and Cufurović (2017) are crucial. As stated before, Todorova (2009) had argued that the Balkans were never only a geographic space. They were, rather, always a space which was being constantly interpreted through the representations from the outside and through the tensions between Europe and its supposed “other” (Todorova 2009, 3, 7, 17-19). Cufurović (2017, 39) had argued this in an even sharper way by stating that the Balkans became “fully known yet wholly unknowable”. What that means is that they were known to Europe, but that they still were treated as distant because of its Ottoman and “Easter” associations (Cufurović 2017, 39). Looking at this through this lens, the actors chosen above are not random. The EU is using the region as a space of conditional Europeanisation (Jano 2008, 67). Russia is using its unresolved status to weaken the integration with the West (Daniel et al. 2024, 60). China is using the need of the region for development and infrastructure, and finally, Türkiye is using the historical familiarity and its Ottoman-Islamic memory (Ivanković 2022, 131,144; Vračić 2016, 6). Here, it can be seen that the different tools are being used simultaneously. All of them are operating in the same ambiguity. That ambiguity being that the Western Balkans is close enough for it to matter, but it is also unfinished enough to be acted upon.

Here, the “geopolitical chessboards” image of Bieber and Tzifakis (2019) comes into focus once again and it is quite useful. The metaphor that Bieber and Tzifakis (2019, 5, 10, 20) are using can describe this real competition. At the same time, that same metaphor can make the old problems come to the surface again. Those problems would be that the region becomes, once again, mostly a space where the others are moving, calculating, organising and competing (Bieber and Tzifakis 2019, 5, 10, 20). This is connected directly to Bjelić and Balibar. Bjelić, drawing on Balibar (2003, 4, 6), had argued that the Balkans are not outside of Europe. They are rather stationed where Europe confronts its own borders and contradictions (Bjelić 2003, 9-10). This is why the Western Balkans are simultaneously treated as European but not really European, sovereign but supervised at the same time and included and postponed simultaneously. Thus, the examples of those countries given above are important in the sense that they are showing what actually happens when that ambiguity remains unsolved. The other actor then do not actually need to invent the uncertainty in the region. What they only need to do is enter into it.

Stabilitocracy, Bieber's (2018) idea, is providing this thesis with its final layer. Bieber (2018, 178-179) had argued that the stabilitocracy is a step back from that original promise of integration into the European Union as equality and convergence. It is giving geopolitical stability, a president over democratic change (Bieber 2018, 178-179). This final layer of this thesis is showing that the Western Balkans are not only being shaped from the outside. The leaders in that region have also learned how to perform stability, how to manage crises and present themselves as partners, which are necessary to those actors coming from the outside. In this way, the region is not passive. However, the agency of the region is being developed inside a system which was already defined by other actors. Precisely this is why the discussion on the external actors belongs in this thesis. It is showing that the Western Balkans, still are, a political space whose meaning is constantly being negotiated between the projects coming from the outside and internal strategies, rather than it being a region which is given a chance to define itself fully on its own terms.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This thesis began with this question: *How has the term “Western Balkans” been historically constructed, politically instrumentalised, and culturally contested from the late nineteenth century to the present, and is this category now transforming or disappearing as a result of European integration and changing regional identities?*

The more closely the term “Western Balkans” has been examined throughout this thesis, the less stable it had become. The term is not a clear geographical category because the borders of it are shifting in accordance with political status. It is not a stable cultural identity because its people and its states have, repeatedly, either accepted, rejected, escaped or reinterpreted it. Yet, it is not a historical region either as the sole term “Western Balkans”, in the contemporary meaning of it, that is, much newer than the histories it is claiming to describe. Thus, this thesis has shown that the best way to see and understand the Western Balkans is as a political and discursive category. It is a category that is produced from its history, it has been shaped externally, it has been and stayed internally contested and is still being preproduced through the language of European Integration.

Throughout the fourth chapter, *“From Empire to Nation: Historical Foundations and Pre-Yugoslav Identity Formation (Mid-19th Century-1918)”*, it is evident that this pattern began before the European Union. The Balkans were repeatedly treated as a problem that was in need of managing by others from the late nineteenth century onward. One of the best examples of this management by others was the *Congress of Berlin* in 1878. The future of those countries in the region was being decided by the Great Powers. The main concern of theirs was not local self-determination. It was the balance of Europe. The people in the region were not fully passive, which can be seen in the examples of *the League of Prizren*, the Serbian and Bulgarian national movements, the *Illyrian movements* and the Balkan Wars that followed. Yet, their future was being repeatedly filtered through imperial and diplomatic structures which were much larger than they were. Therefore, the argument from the point of history of this thesis is not that the Balkans did not have any agency; it is rather that the agency was usually developed inside systems which had been designed by others. Thus, to understand the future, it is necessary to look at the past, and that is what this thesis did. Back then, the region had been organised through imperial rivalry, diplomatic congress and competing national projects and those methods have changed when looking at the methods of today. Yet, the outside shaping of the region still remains.

The fifth chapter on *“Yugoslavia and its Afterlife”* complicated the picture even more. The importance of Yugoslavia to this thesis is that it is a representation of an attempt to answer the

problem of fragmentation from within the region itself. That was not just an artificial mistake, nor was the collapse of Yugoslavia inevitable from the beginning. The first Yugoslavia was not successful in creating an agreement which could withstand centralism, federalism and different national expectations. The second, socialist Yugoslavia, did manage to go further by its recognition of republics, nations and provinces and also by creating a social and cultural space which had been shared through education, youth structures, work, the army, travel and everyday life. However, this Yugoslavia was also dependent on mechanisms that could not survive forever. The final collapse of it created new states and more. By more, it means that it had opened those older vocabularies of instability, violence and unfinished statehood. Then, what had once been Yugoslavia had gradually become easier to describe as “the Balkans” again.

In the sixth chapter on the “*Birth of the Modern Term “Western Balkans”*”, the Balkans grew into the now known “Western Balkans”. Therefore, they were not simply discovered by the European Union. However, what the European Union did was help to create that term as a policy category. That label had helped the EU to group together those post-conflict and post-socialist states that had not yet become members, but were still promised accession in the future. This is why the cases of Slovenia and Croatia are so important for this thesis. The example of Slovenia is showing that the historical belonging to Yugoslavia is not enough for it to be placed inside that modern category. Concurrently, the example of Croatia is to show that a country can be a part of the Western Balkans in one moment, and no longer be part of the Western Balkans after accession. Precisely that is the point of this example, as the geography did not change in 2013, only the *political status* did.

This is also an answer to one of the central questions that this thesis poses: *Is the Western Balkans disappearing?* The answer to that question is yes and no. When it comes to individual states, per the example of Croatia, it can disappear once they enter the European Union. It may fade away for Albania, Montenegro, or others if they join the EU eventually. However, the category itself cannot disappear as long as the enlargement is not finished. Every time the European Union speaks about the “Western Balkans six”, it is reproduced. Every time the European Union publishes enlargement reports, every time it organises summits, financial facilities, reform agendas, growth plans and regional cooperation mechanisms, the region is signed anew. Therefore, the category will survive as long as the condition that produced it survives: being European, but not yet inside the institutional borders of Europe.

Orientalism, and especially the idea of nesting orientalism, helps to explain why this label is simultaneously being reproduced from within that region itself. It is not only Western Europe that is placing the Balkans lower in a hierarchy of Europeanness. The states and the peoples

within that region also distance themselves from those which are placed further south, further east, more Ottoman, more Muslim, more unstable or more “Balkan” (Bakić-Hayden 1995, 918-919). This logic can be seen in how Slovenia is distancing itself from the Balkans, from how Croatia “returned to Europe”, and even the way that the accession to the EU becomes imagined as an exit from Balkan stigma. Thus, the Western Balkans is not just imposed from the outside. It is internalised at the same time, it is rejected, and it is being strategically used by the societies that are named by it.

The seventh chapter on the “*Contemporary Geopolitical Context*” is showing that this process is still continuing today. The European Union remains the most important actor because it defines the political meaning of the category. The Western Balkans are given their direction precisely with that promise of accession. Thessaloniki (2003) promised that the future of the Balkans is in the European Union. However, more than two decades later, most of the region is still in that waiting room. The crisis of credibility, most evident in the case of North Macedonia, is one of the clearest examples of the contemporary geopolitical context. If a state goes as far as to change its constitutional name, as North Macedonia has done, and it still does not move clearly toward membership in the EU, the promise of conditionality begins to lose its force. Bosnia and Herzegovina is given as an example of how waiting can become connected to sovereignty and international supervision. Kosovo is showing how recognition can block even the most basic path toward integration. Concurrently, Montenegro and Albania are examples that accession still seems possible. However, this possibility also depends, more and more, on broader geopolitical circumstances and not only on changes within the countries themselves. Russia, China and Türkiye are examples of what happens when the waiting room stays open for too long. None of these three is able to replace the European Union, nor is that the point of them. The point is that all of them are seeing the unfinished status of the Western Balkans in different ways.

The region is, yet again, available, precisely because it is promised inclusion, but is kept on the outside.

Therefore, the answer to the main question of this thesis is this: the Western Balkans have been historically constructed through imperial ordering, have been politically instrumentalised through the enlargement policy of the European Union, and are culturally contested through the long-standing tension between Balkan stigma and belonging to Europe. It is changing, but it is not disappearing. It is transforming because the borders of the region change as a state moves closer to or enters the European Union. It is transforming because Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia do not occupy the same position within that category. It is also transforming because those external actors are now using the region

through different tools than before. However, as stated before, it is not yet disappearing because the political condition that created it has not disappeared.

Thus, the deeper issue is not if the Western Balkans exists. It clearly does in policy, in diplomacy, in funding, in summits, reports and in everyday discourse. The real question is who has the power to define this region and the purpose of that. This thesis has shown that the answer has rarely been the people of the region alone. From Berlin in 1878 to Thessaloniki in 20003, from the collapse of Yugoslavia to the geopolitical competition of today, the region has constantly been named, divided, managed and interpreted by those on the outside of it. However, it has also resisted, it has adapted, negotiated and used those categories from within.

Precisely this is where the importance of redefining the Western Balkans lies. Not because the label can simply be erased, and not because the region should deny its own histories. It is important because the category should no longer be treated as natural or self-evident. It ought to be understood as something made. Thus, if it were made, then it can also be questioned.

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e) Interviews

Brkić, Josip. Interview by the author. Online interview. May 2026.

Bregu, Majlinda. Interview by the author. Written interview. May 2026.

Inzko, Valentin. Interview by the author. Online interview. May 2026

Svilanović, Goran. Interview by the author. Online interview. May 2026.

Toplak, Cirila. Interview by the author. Online interview. May 2026.

Appendices

A) Chronology

1878	Congress of Berlin: Austro-Hungarian occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina; reconfiguration of power in the Balkans.
1908	Annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary.
1912-1913	First and Second Balkan Wars.
1918	Proclamation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.
1929	Renaming of the state to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia; introduction of royal dictatorship.
1941	Axis invasion and dismemberment of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.
1945	Establishment of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia.
1948	Tito–Stalin split; Yugoslavia expelled from the Cominform.
1961	First Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement held in Belgrade.
1974	Adoption of the Yugoslav Constitution granting increased autonomy to republics and provinces.
4. 5. 1980.	Death of Josip Broz Tito.
1991	Declarations of independence by Slovenia and Croatia.
1992	Outbreak of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
1995	Signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement.

1999	NATO intervention in Kosovo.
2000	Overthrow of Slobodan Milošević in Serbia.
2003	EU Thessaloniki Summit: confirmation of the “European perspective” of the Western Balkans.
2006	Independence of Montenegro.
2008	Declaration of Independence of Kosovo.
2013	Accession of Croatia to the European Union.
2018	Prespa Agreement signed; Macedonia renamed North Macedonia.

B) Dramatis Personae

Otto von Bismarck	German Chancellor, convened and chaired the Congress of Berlin (1878)
Benjamin Kállay	Joint Austro-Hungarian Minister of Finance; administrator of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1882–1903), promoted a distinct Bosnian identity under imperial rule.
King Peter I Karadorđević	King of Serbia (1903–1918) and first King of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1918–1921).
King Alexander I Karadorđević	King of Yugoslavia (1921–1934); imposed royal dictatorship in 1929; assassinated in Marseille.
Stjepan Radić	Croatian politician and leader of the Croatian Peasant Party; assassinated in the Yugoslav parliament in 1928.

Puniša Račić

Serbian politician; assassinated Stjepan Radić and other Croatian deputies in the Yugoslav parliament in 1928.

Josip Broz Tito

Leader of the Yugoslav Partisans during World War II; President of Socialist Yugoslavia (1945–1980).

Aleksandar Ranković

Senior Yugoslav communist official; head of state security until 1966; associated with centralist tendencies.

Slobodan Milošević

President of Serbia (1989–1997) and of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1997–2000); central figure in the Yugoslav wars.

Franjo Tuđman

President of Croatia (1990–1999); led Croatia through independence and war in the 1990s.

Alija Izetbegović

Chairman of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1996); key political leader during the Bosnian war.

Radovan Karadžić

Leader of the Bosnian Serbs during the Bosnian war; later convicted of war crimes.

Ratko Mladić

Commander of the Army of Republika Srpska during the Bosnian war; later convicted of war crimes.

C) Glossary

Senjak	An administrative district within the Ottoman Empire
Vilayet	A term for a major administrative division or province
Firman	Official royal mandate, decree, or edict issued directly by the reigning Sultan
Porte	The central government and administration of the Ottoman Empire
Balkanization	Balkanization refers to the process by which a larger political or territorial unit breaks apart into smaller, often mutually antagonistic entities. The term originated in Western political discourse in the early twentieth century, drawing on the fragmentation of the Balkan region following the decline of empires. Over time, it got a strongly negative connotation, commonly used to imply instability, ethnic conflict, and political dysfunction.
Brotherhood and Unity	“Brotherhood and Unity” was the central ideological principle of socialist Yugoslavia. It was promoting peaceful coexistence and cooperation among the country’s different ethnic, national and religious groups, emphasizing collective identity over particular national loyalties. The concept was supposed to suppress nationalism and legitimize the Yugoslav federal project.
Chetniks	The Chetniks were a Serbian nationalist and royalist movement active during the Second World War. Initially, they were formed as a resistance group against Axis occupation. They later collaborated with occupying forces in certain contexts and engaged in violent actions against non-Serb populations. Their legacy is still very contested in post-Yugoslav historical memory.

Ustaša

The Ustaša was a Croatian fascist and ultranationalist movement active during the Second World War. It governed the Independent State of Croatia under Axis protection and implemented policies of mass violence, persecution and genocide against Serbs, Jews, Rom and political opponents. The movement is still a deeply sensitive and polarizing subject in regional memory and politics.

Dayton Agreement

The Dayton Peace Agreement, signed in 1995, formally ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It established the country as a single sovereign state composed of two entities and introduced a complex system of ethnic power-sharing combined with extensive international supervision. The agreement prioritized stability and peace over political simplicity or institutional efficiency.

Ethnic Power-Sharing

Ethnic power-sharing describes a political arrangement in which state institutions are structured to guarantee representation for specific ethnic groups. In the Western Balkans, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, this model was implemented to prevent renewed conflict but has also contributed to rigid identity divisions and governance challenges.

Illyrian Movement

The Illyrian Movement was a nineteenth-century cultural and political movement centered primarily in Croatia. It aimed to promote South Slavic unity through a shared language and cultural heritage. Although, it did not achieve political unification, it played a crucial role in shaping early Yugoslav and pan-Slavic ideas.

Non-Aligned Movement

The Non-Aligned Movement was an international coalition of states that sought to remain independent from both the Western and Eastern blocs during the Cold War. Yugoslavia played a leading role in its formation, using non-

alignment as a means of asserting sovereignty, increasing global influence, and positioning itself as an alternative model of socialism.

Orientalism

Orientalism refers to a framework through which Western societies have historically represented non-Western regions as exotic, backward, irrational or even inferior. In the context of the Balkans, this logic has been adapted to portray the region as Europe's internal "other," simultaneously European yet not fully belonging.

Western Balkans

The Western Balkans is a political term that emerged in the late 1990s, primarily within European Union policy discourse. It refers to a group of Southeast European countries that are not members of the EU but are formally considered potential candidates. The term functions less as a geographical descriptor and more as an administrative and strategic category. Often carrying implicit assumptions about political development and readiness for integration.

Yugoslavism

Yugoslavism was an ideological concept advocating the political and cultural unification of South Slavic peoples. It developed in the nineteenth century and took institutional form in the Yugoslav state. While intended to transcend ethnic divisions, it was interpreted and implemented in different ways across time, contributing both to integration and to later tensions.