Homo-Politicus in the Balkans
Preface

MARIA BARAMOVA

In recent years *Festschrift* volumes dedicated to a particular scholar have increasingly appeared to exhaust the significance of the genre. This is partly attributable to the widespread proliferation of such publications. Nevertheless, the scholarly value and quality of any collected volume depend primarily on its theme and on the contributions and contributors assembled within its covers. When a volume is devoted to the scholarly work of a researcher of international standing, it once again becomes a meaningful contribution to the field rather than merely being yet another *Festschrift*. The present volume exemplifies this distinction: it brings together contributions by a cohort of distinguished historians in honor of Professor Ivan Parvev's sixty-fifth birthday.

Ivan Parvev needs no introduction, especially for readers engaged with the historiography of the Early Modern period and the Balkans in a Central European context. His research focuses on European–Ottoman political relations (16th–18th centuries), the Balkans and the Eastern Question (17th–20th centuries), the interconnections between Central Europe and the Balkans in the Early Modern era and selected aspects of the theory and geopolitics of international relations.

In his monograph *Land in Sicht* (Mainz, 2008) Ivan Parvev employs the figure of the "Homo Politicus" to designate the politically oriented reader in Central Europe during the Early Modern period. Although frequently neglected, this type periodically reasserts its importance as historians repeatedly return to questions of geopolitics, international relations and diplomacy. Recently – possibly under the influence of shifting contemporary geopolitics – studies of and attention to the *Homo Politicus* have once again gained prominence.

This volume is, on the one hand, a reflection of Ivan Parvev's long-standing research interests and, on the other, a timely reassessment of the history of the Balkans and Central Europe from the pre-modern era to the present. From this perspective, it was relatively straightforward to delineate the research field in which to situate the theme "Homo politicus in the Balkans." The contributors of the individual essays are not only close friends, colleagues and former students of Ivan Parvev but are also actively engaged with this historiographical approach.

This volume reconceptualizes Early Modern Southeast Europe through the figure of the *Homo-Politicus*: the array of actors whose political practices shaped and were shaped by overlapping imperial and regional orders. Focusing on the Balkans in the Early Modern Period and combining historical case studies with comparative and

trans-imperial perspectives, contributors investigate diplomacy, warfare and geopolitics. The individual essays are grouped into several thematic sections. Appended to this introduction – as a continuation and synthesis of the historiographical discourse in this volume – is an essay by Ivan Ilchev, long-serving Rector of Sofia University and one of the doyens of Balkan Studies in Bulgaria.

The first section, entitled "Imperial Policies and Local Responses," brings together studies which examine the relationships and influence of empires in Southeastern Europe from the Early Modern period to the nineteenth century, with particular attention to their diplomatic, ideological and social dimensions. For example, Mathias Schnettger offers a critical reassessment of the mythologizing of Prince Eugene as the "Saviour of the West," while Maria Baramova provides a conceptual analysis of the Habsburg Monarchy as a geopolitical, intellectual and symbolic "concept" in Southeastern Europe up to 1791. Sabine Jesner investigates the introduction and professionalization of health policies in Habsburg-reclaimed Transylvania.

More broadly, the section also addresses Europe's "imperial encounters" with the Ottoman world – the policies, perceptions and personalities that shaped the Eastern Question and the transformation in imperial diplomacy and thought from the Early Modern period into the nineteenth century. Harald Heppner focuses on the annexation of Crimea (1783) from a Viennese perspective and its geopolitical, diplomatic and ideological implications for Austrian policy. Maria A. Petrova examines Russian expansion in the eighteenth century and the foreign policy of Catherine the Great through the lens of contemporary Russian historiography. Heinz Duchhardt analyzes the views and role of the Freiherr von Stein with respect to the Ottoman Empire. Finally, Plamen Mitev discusses the activities of the Odessa Slavic Charitable Society and its connections with Bulgarians up to 1878.

The second section, entitled "Voices on the Ottoman Realm," concentrates on European perspectives on Southeastern Europe – how travel narratives, religious treatises and historical writings constructed representations of the Ottoman Empire and its capital. Thus Arno Strohmeyer analyses the role and significance of religion in the correspondence of Habsburg envoys in Constantinople in the mid-17th century; Tzvetan Radulov surveys major trends in Bulgarian scholarship on Christian travelogues about the Ottoman Empire, identifying recurring themes, stereotypes and the different uses of these sources; Nadezhda Alexandrova examines the depiction of Constantinople by Dimitrie Cantemir and Sofroniy Vrachanski in *The Book Called System and Structure of Muhammadan Religion*; and Konrad Petrovszky investigates the political and biographical contexts which shaped Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall's *Geschichte des Osmanischen Reiches*, including the motivations, sources and ideological impulses informing his narrative.

The final section, "Politics of Memory and the Production of Knowledge in Southeast Europe," focuses on the politics of memory and the production of regional knowledge: in other words, how historical narratives, school curricula, institutions and pub-

lic actors have constructed, instrumentalized and reworked images of the region across different periods and political contexts. This thematic cluster brings together contributions by Maria N. Todorova, Naoum Kaytchev and Snezhana Dimitrova, alongside Olga Katsiardi Hering's critical analysis of the role of research institutes in the production of regional knowledge and of the tensions between academic autonomy and political influence.

Last but not least, if Ivan Ilchev's opening question "What are the Balkans?" brackets the historiographical approach of this volume, Wolfgang Schmale's study of think tanks – tracing efforts to introduce covert narratives and frameworks into European discourse on the Western Balkans and the effects of these interventions on political and public perception – can be read as a closing of that interpretive loop.

I sincerely hope that this volume will constitute a significant contribution to the historiographical and theoretical understanding of Southeast European history. Framed through the lens of Ivan Parvev's enduringly respected scholarship, it aims to shed new light on the region's past and its interpretive traditions.

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The completion of this volume would not have been possible without the contributions of many beyond the authors themselves. I am especially grateful to Dr. Anne Simon (University of London), who, out of long standing friendship with Ivan Parvev, generously copy edited the texts; to Professor Wolfgang Schmale (University of Vienna), whose idea and assistance secured the inclusion of the volume in the series *Historische Mitteilungen – Beihefte* of the Ranke Gesellschaft; to Dr. Konrad Petrovszky (Austrian Academy of Sciences), to the series editor, Professor Markus A. Denzel; and to the team at the Franz Steiner Verlag. Finally, I extend special thanks to Nina Georgieva and Dr. Petar Stoilov, researchers at the University Centre for Regional Studies and Analysis at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (whose founder and academic director is Ivan Parvev), for their immense work on the technical preparation and editorial polishing of the texts.

Ad multos annos!

Sofia, August 2025 Maria Baramova

What are the Balkans?!

IVAN ILCHEV

Abstract Ivan Ilchev examines the shifting meaning of the Balkans as both a physical peninsula and a symbolic frontier. Using diplomatic anecdotes and historiographical analysis, he shows how Western observers framed the region as Europe's unruly periphery, while internal mosaics of languages, religions, and mutable borders complicate any stable definition of "Balkan peoples". Ilchev reviews the disputed etymology of the term, the nineteenth-century invention of the Balkan Peninsula and, and the Peninsula's role as buffer for the Roman Empire and today's EU and NATO. He concludes that Balkan identity is relational, crystallizing only through contrast with a vague yet normative idea of Europe.

Keywords Balkan identity, European periphery, nationalism, historiography, cultural diversity, frontiers

At the beginning of the 20th century the future American Secretary of State William Bryan was travelling around Europe. In Istanbul he boarded the Orient Express to journey to Vienna. The Secretary to the American Legation was seeing him off and congratulated him on the chance to see the Balkans, which had captured the imagination of the Europeans with its cauldron of ethnic rivalries and the struggle of the Great Powers for influence in the region. The man who would stand at the helm of American foreign policy a decade later and decide the fate of nations looked him straight in the eye and asked nonchalantly: "What are the Balkans?!". This is a question that a number of people continue to ask, especially after the events that shook the Peninsula in the 1990s, the wars in the former Yugoslavia and Kosovo and the unstability in the Republic of North Macedonia.

In the 1990s I was taking part in a major conference on European security in Liechtenstein. My colleagues from Western Europe and the United States could not comprehend the mass tumult and chaos in part of Europe, admittedly a true borderland, but still part of Europe. Explanations differed. The most plausible one – on this almost full concensus was reached – was that historical animosities played a major role in starting the conflagration. Debate centred on what course of action to pursue. The frankest answer was given by an American general – the Military famously prefer straightforward answers. He said: "Guys, let us be inventive and forbid the teaching of history in the Balkans. Twenty years from now", he continued magnanimously, "we might allow them the liberty to be liberal and allow a pinch of history, though not much, in the textbooks". He might have sounded naïve, but the stark truth is that even now a number

of scholars, not to mention practitioners of history, have grave doubts on where the boundaries of the Balkans actually lie and whether they really belong to Europe and its political and cultural traditions.

Paul Ricoeur developed the thesis that memory is constructed in the transmission between the past, the present and the future. One of the problems, however, when we try to distinguish between them, is that nations, although they live concurrently, quite often live in different time; and the Balkans have lived in a different time from the rest of Europe for quite a while. Indeed, the leading French intellectuals of the 18th century were giants like Voltaire, Montesquieu and Diderot. At the same time, the leading intellectuals in the Balkans were semi-literate monks whose intellectual scope rarely journeyed beyond the walls of the monasteries where they spent their lives or their knowledge beyond the pages of mediaeval manuscripts. It took time and enormous effort to bridge up the gap.

It is interesting that even geographers, not to mention politicians, cultural historians and economists, cannot reach a unanimous verdict on what the confines of the region are. Although it was depicted as a peninsula even on ancient maps, the name "Balkan Peninsula" is comparatively new. It appeared for the first time in 1808 in a geography textbook written by the German geographer August Zeune. He suggested that all large peninsulas in Europe should be named after their main mountain ranges – the Pyrenees, the Apennines, the Balkans. At the time his was an original suggestion which started from a false premise. He thought that the Balkan Mountains stretched from one end of the Peninsula to the other. When one thinks of it, there is something symptomatic in the fact that the very origin of the name of the Peninsula is wrong. Nevertheless, the name was slowly accepted because it had no political or ethnic connotations, unlike some other proposals – Hellenic; Byzantine; Greek; Illyrian; Thracian; Helleno-Greek Peninsula; Turkey in Europe – to mention only a few. There are some other terms, now outdated, or considered politically incorrect, that were used at some time, like the Levant, the Orient etc.

Even the origin of the word "Balkan" itself is not clear. Linguists argue in favor of a Turkish, Arab or Persian origin but the most popular explanation is that it means a wooded mountain; and, without any doubt, it is connected to the Turkish cultural heritage in the Peninsula. Nowadays, the term South-Eastern Europe gains wide popularity. It is a positive term and shows the inalienable connection with Europe and therefore countries which foster misgivings about belonging to the Balkans accept it willingly. According to most geographers, the boundaries of the Balkans are the seas to the east, to the south and to the west – the Black Sea, the Sea of Marmara, the Aegean, the Ionian and the Adriatic Sea; the River Danube to the north and the River Sava to the north-west. Some add the territory up to the River Isonzo, which includes the Istrian Peninsula. The territory is generally considered to encompass around 506,000 sq. km, virtually the same as Spain.

When one speaks of the Balkans, what one often has in mind are the Balkan peoples. It is interesting that we speak of Balkan peoples, but not of Andean and rarely of Iberian or Alpine peoples. Evidently, in the mind of the public there is something in the Balkan peoples that unites them, notwithstanding the fact that the nations living on the Peninsula are differ in many respects. It seems there exist certain traits of national character, events, traditions and tendencies which, in the eyes of laymen, look relatively constant and intertwined. If, however, we take a broader view of the Balkans, we may think of them as a cultural-historical area uniting the Balkan peoples as far as Moldavia to the north-east, Hungary to the north-west and Cyprus to the south. (There are geographers who include Hungary in this term, mindful of the centuries-old involvement of the Kingdom in the area.

Who, though, are the real Balkan peoples who have belonged to this land since time immemorial? Those whose origin can be traced back to the Peninsula itself? From this point of view, only the Albanians and to a certain extent the Greeks fit the description. Those who settled on these lands long enough ago in the past? What, though, is long enough? This resembles the old riddle of how many stones make a heap of stones: one, two, three. How many years do a given group of humans have to live in the Peninsula to be counted a Balkan people? What about the Jews, who first came as early as the era of the Roman Empire and continue to live there? Could we count their heirs as a Balkan people?

The ultra-patriotic historians and geographers of the Balkan Christian nations generally turn a blind eye to the uncomfortable presence of the Turks in these lands. We speak of a people who are certainly not autochthonous to the Peninsula but settled certain parts of it more than 800 years ago. They were invaders who conquered these lands with fire and brimstone, so should be ignored with disdain, claim the nationalists – as if the predecessors of the Greeks, the Slavs and the Bulgarians came as peaceful settlers. What about the Hungarians living in Transylvania, or the Tartars living in Dobrudja? Could we consider them Balkan peoples? Can we, in fact, speak of pure Balkan peoples or this is just a comfortable fiction? Years ago I gave a course of lectures on the ethnic history of the Balkans at the American Military Academy in Alexandria, Virginia. Just before I started, an officer leapt to attention and shot a question at me: "Professor Ilchev, you are supposed to explain to us the ethnic history of the Balkans. Are you yourself pure Bulgarian?" I retorted: "If you had asked this question of me, Sir, and we had been living in the 18th century, I would have thrown my glove in your face and challenged you to a duel, because the question implies that all my grandmothers must have been so ugly that they failed to attract the unwanted attention of the numerous waves of invaders who passed through and settled in the Peninsula." Let us focus on Bulgaria, which is not much different to the other Balkan countries. Up to the disintegration of the Roman Empire in the 6th century Thracians, Greeks, Persians, Romans, Syrians, Egyptians, Adiabenians, Alans, Armeniacs, Bastarnae, Vandals, Visigoths, Gauls, Gepids, Getae, Goths, Ostrogoths, Jews, Car-

pi, Parthians, Peutings, Persians, Saracenes, Sarmatians, Skyrs and Huns all passed through or settled in these lands. Then the picture becomes even more complex. Before the Turkish conquest of the Peninsula it was settled by Slavs, Proto-Bulgarians, Hungarians, Armenians, Arabs, Avars, Pechenegs, Cumans, the Gagauz, Roma, Uzes, Normans, Catalans and Tartars.

The next question is as follows: are the Balkans part of Europe; and, if so, are they a specific, but nevertheless intrinsic part? Many Europeans seriously doubted that for quite some time and, indeed, continue to doubt it. In the 1820s the long-serving Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Austrian Empire Prince Klemens von Meternich used to assert: "Asia begins at the end of the Landstrasse". This statement also implied that Hungary was in Asia, when Asia was for him something murky, mysterious, backward. Otto von Bismarck used to claim something similar, namely, that the whole of the Balkans did not deserve the bones of a simple Pomeranian grenadier. Archduke Franz Ferdinand, whose assassination in Sarajevo provoked the First World War, asserted in his turn that the decision of the Hungarians to come to Europe was an expression of bad taste. Around the same time Bismarck characterized the typical Frenchman as a "a monsieur who has no idea of geography". The famous British writer Rudyard Kipling confidently agreed with them: "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet". At the end of the 19th and in the early 20th century politicians knew little about the Balkans, which irritated them with their petty squabbles, and they cared even less.

In 1894 an immensely popular novel was published, one which was to be filmed several times in later years: *The Prisoner of Zenda* by Anthony Hopkins. The action takes place in an imagined kingdom. The small Balkan states, with their dynastic rivalries, risible aristocracy and countless plots, seem to have been the source of inspiration for the author. At the beginning of World War I, one of the secretaries of the French statesman Aristide Briand recorded his unflattering opinion of his boss in his diary: "What amazes me is his complete ignorance of the Balkans. For him, they are dark, blurred and unknown, the way Central Africa was for mediaeval cartographers". Aristide Briand was among those who would draw up the borders in the Balkans, being one of France's most experienced politicians – six times Prime Minister and holder of different ministerial positions, among them Minister of Foreign Affairs.

In 1903 the Serbian military committed a bloody *coup d'état*, killing both their king and his wife. The influential British newspaper *The Pall Mall Gazette* exclaimed that this showed that the Serbians and, indeed, "all Balkan nations" were uncivilized, because the real location of such an event could have been Bukhara or any other Central Asian city and not Europe. *The Times* gleefully suggested dragging Serbia to the Adriatic Sea to drown it there, adding that the horrendous murder was in the Asian tradition. Similar invectives were not, however, used when an Italian anarchist stabbed Empress Elisabeth of Austria with a blunt file (1898); or when Portuguese republicans shot to death King Carlos I of Portugal and his heir-apparent, Luís Filipe, Prince Royal of Por-

tugal (1908). As late as 1995, when the Serbians bombarded Zagreb it was described in a newspaper article as a town which was more European than Balkan.

According to the foremost theoretician of nationalism, Ernest Gellner, two individuals belong to the same nation if each of them believes himself to be a member of that nation and recognizes that the other is also part of it. This is a simple rule, according to which the members of the Balkan nations thought of themselves as Europeans. The question is whether the Europeans living to the West of them recognized them as equals. Following prevailing Euro-centric imperial notions, the Balkans, being part of the Near East, were, culturally at least, part of Asia; and Asia was a symbol of "*otherness*", symbol fraught with negative connotations – at both a cultural and a political level. In the 1910s a Bulgarian student of astronomy in France, who later became a member of the Academy of Sciences in Sofia, was invited to a Sunday lunch by his professor. When dessert was served, the hostess put a knife between her teeth, pretending to be a blood-thirsty pirate and telling the astonished youth that until then she had thought the Bulgarians looked like that. At the Paris Peace Conference of 1919–1920 the British Prime Minister David Lloyd George was prepared to give half of Asia Minor to Greece. The reason? He looked at the map and thought the regions coloured green represented the area of Greek settlements, whereas in reality they represented the plains of the Peninsula.

On the other hand, let us try to be objective. It is not only in Western European knowledge of the Balkans that is scant: the Balkan nations themselves are not well informed about one another, about their respective national programs, their problems and their successes. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and modern North Macedonia are conspicuously lackiing from the school curriculum in Bulgaria. The same appears to be true of the school textbooks in the countries of the Western Balkans. Our young grow up with virtually no idea of what is really happening 50 km from the borders of their own countries and are quite often fed outdated myths with a nationalist aftertaste. In a word, the question is this: what makes Europe Europe; and what makes one country a Balkan one and another a European?

There is something demeaning about being in the Balkans. In recent decades Slovenia has decidedly refused to be in the Balkans: the Slovenes consider their homeland to be a Central European country, part of the so-called Julian Adriatic Zone. The Croatians prefer to think of themselves as Central Europeans. The Romanians, depending on the circumstances, are either Balkan or Central European. The Greeks passionately refuse to be a Balkan country, seeing themselves as a Mediterranean one, heirs to the oldest European civilization. Who, then, remains? Those who live in the central part of the Peninsula. There is hope, however: Turkey wishes to be a Balkan country. For Ankara the Balkans are Europe.

Even now, knowledge about the Balkans in Western Europe is relatively restricted, namely, to narrow intellectual circles. It is like looking through a telescope. When the Balkan nations use it, their problems loom large and become significant in Europe.

However, the Western Europeans and the Americans look through the other end and so our problems suddenly become small and insignificant. Years ago I taught a class on Balkan history to doctoral students at Ohio State University in America. I thought I had acquitted myself well when one of the students – a clergyman and probably older than me – accosted me and remarked: "Your lecture was excellent (*flattery, of course*), but please do not forget that for us – Americans – the sources of the Danube and the Nile are next to each other". In a way, it is no wonder. For much of the 19th and early 20th centuries it was usually more difficult to travel through the Balkans than to go to Egypt, for example. The distance from Marseilles to Port Said (1,981 miles or 3,671 km) usually took around 8 days. Around that time, it took the delighted Czech historian Dr. Konstantin Irechek three and a half days to travel from Vienna to Sofia (a little more than a 1000 km). Indeed, if one looks at the map of railroads in Europe in the 1870s one sees a huge blank space in South Eastern Europe.

Even now, the length of the motorways in the Balkans south of the Danube is less than 6,000 km, while in Spain it is more than 18,000 km, or three times more on approximately the same territory. One reason for this lack of transport infrastructure is the comparative poverty of the region. We may debate the reasons for that – the climate, the labor problems, the difficult heritage of the imperial past, especially at the time of the Ottoman Empire. However, the fact remains that Slovenia (if we consider it a Balkan country) alone ranks among the top half, by GDP per capita (21st), of the 48 European countries while 6 out of the 10 bottom countries are Balkan countries (Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo).

Some authors suggest that before we start to speak of South-Eastern Europe, we should clarify what Eastern Europe is. Do the Komi living next to the Ural Mountains and the Albanians, for instance, have anything in common? From a geographical standpoint, Eastern Europe comprises the lands to the east of the German border. What about Poland then? Is it an East European or a Central European country? What about Finland and the Baltic states? Sometimes these lands are called "Zwischenländer" [in-between lands] – lands which are not Western European but are not Russian either. In other cases, the lands between Russia and Western Europe are defined as an intermediate zone. After World War II the term was almost synonymous with Communist Eastern Europe. What about Greece, however? Some authors claim that it is easier to define the Balkan region in negative terms, rather than positive ones. In a word, the Balkans are not Western Europe, but they are not Russia either.

What, however, are the differences? The population is Indo-European and, despite the serious ethnic differences, no different from the rest of Europe. From a historical and cultural point of view, the Balkans are closer to the traditional centers of European culture such as Hellas and Rome are Czech lands and Poland, for instance, not to mention Sweden. There is no substantial difference in the climate, the flora or the fauna. There are, however, some easily observed differences. First, the fundamental intellectual and religious movements of modern times, such as the Reformation, the

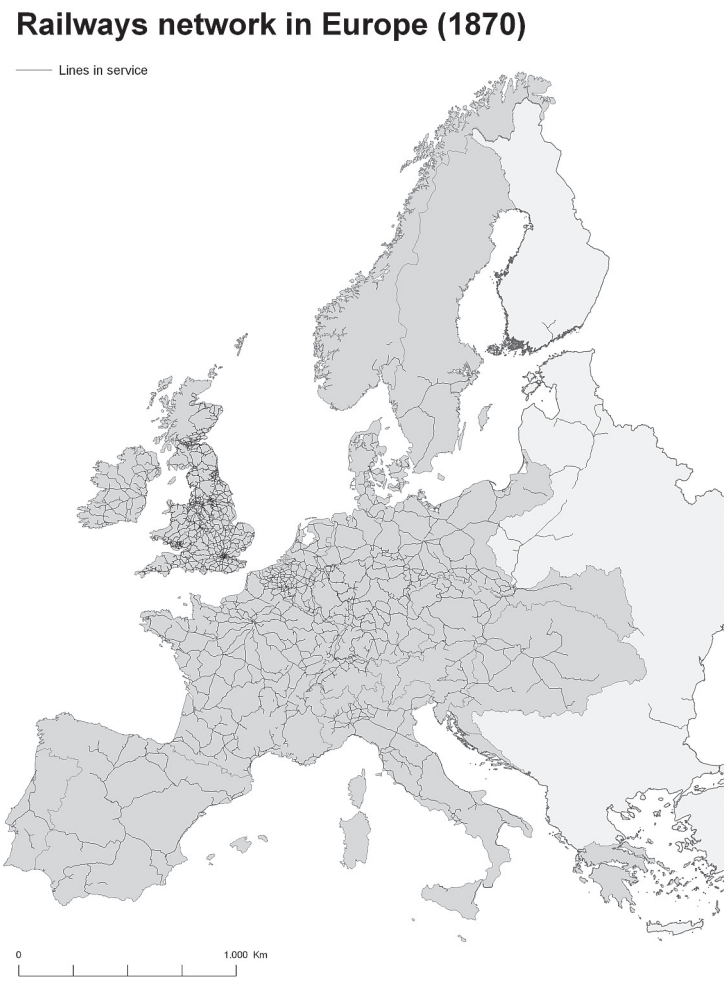

Figure 1 Railways network in Europe (1870

Renaissance and Liberalism, developed outside the territory of the Balkans and as a rule enjoyed a weaker impact there. Second, the ethnic and national conflicts are noticeably stronger, although the events in Belgium and especially in Catalonia in recent decades cast doubt on this. Third, the political processes lag behind those of Western Europe and are often more violent than in Western Europe, although this is again doubtful: the Prime Minister of Serbia Zoran Đinđić and the former Prime Minister of Bulgaria Andrey Karlov Lukanov were assassinated but this does not mean that this does not happen in the West. For example, from the Congress of Berlin (1878) till the Second World War one prime minister and one king were killed in Greece, while in France two presidents and one prime minister became the victims of political violence. Which one of the two countries is more backward? The long-reigning Queen

Victoria of the British Empire was the target of seven unsuccessful attempts on her life. Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme was assassinated (1986). What about the United States, where three presidents have been killed and there were unsuccessful attempts on the lives of at least five others?

What is really true is that the Balkans are much more varied region than Western Europe. On a territory equal to the size of modern Spain, and depending on how you count them, there are at least 11 or 12 states. There are at least 12 nations with a population of more than one million each. The peoples of the Balkans speak languages belonging to the Slavic, the Romance, the Turkish and the Fino-Ugor language groups, as well as isolated languages such as Romani, Greek and Albanian. The Ashkenazi Jews speak a language close to German, the Sephardi one close to Spanish. Representatives of two of the three world religions cohabit there; and among both the Christians and the Moslems there are strong internal differences. Orthodox Christians make up the majority of the population of Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece, Montenegro and North Macedonia; and form a substantial group in Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina and to a lesser extent in Croatia. Catholics predominate in Croatia. In Bulgaria and Romania there are Uniate Churches which combine Orthodox and Catholic characteristics. In Romania, Croatia and to a lesser extent in the other Balkan countries there are Protestants. Sunni Muslims predominate in Eastern Thrace in Turkey, in Albania, in Kosovo and in certain regions in Bosnia and Herzegovina; numerous groups of Sunni Muslims are scattered through Bulgaria, Greece and North Macedonia. Shia Muslims live in European Turkey, in Bulgaria and in Albania. The Bektashis are particularly strong among the Albanians in Albania proper and in western North Macedonia. Apart from them the Peninsula has been settled for more than a thousand years by Armenians, adherents of the Gregorian Church and Judaists. After the First World War and the Russian Civil War numerous Lamaists settled in Bulgaria and Serbia.

The nations of the Peninsula write in three alphabets – Greek, Latin and Cyrillic – and if we count Armenian and Jewish, then five. At the beginning of the 20th century there were six because the Turks used the Arabic script. Even now, the only states in Europe where two alphabets are officially in use are in the Balkans, namely, Serbia, Bosnia Herzegovina and Montenegro (The Albanians in North Macedonia use the Latin alphabet). Up to the First World War the nations in the Peninsula used different calendars: the Gregorian and Julian for the Christians; the Hijrah for the Moslems; and the Jewish calendar for the Jews. There are strong regional differences in the Balkans: in Croatia the Dalmatians differ from the Podravina Croats; in Greece it is comparatively easy to speak of Cretans and Macedonians; in Bulgaria and Serbia of Shops etc.

The state frontiers in the Balkans are quite unstable. The Peninsula has never been in the position of the Iberian Peninsula, for example, where the borders have been relatively stable for hundreds of years. By comparison, in the last two hundred years the Balkans have seen at least 11 major changes in the borders, not to mention the minor ones; and here only the political borders are counted. The borders include and exclude

at the same time. For example, on the one hand Bulgaria was part of the Byzantine space because its rulers tried to copy the fundamental rules of Byzantine society; on the other, in the eyes of the Byzantines themselves the Bulgarians were not part of their habitat, but rather foreigners and barbarians. The territory included within a border is always home to tensions between numerous religious, cultural, linguistic and political affiliations, numerous readings of history and numerous types of relationship with the rest of the world

This is why the democratic composition of people in the form of the nation has inevitably led to systems of *exclusion*: the divide between "majorities" and "minorities" and, more profoundly still, between populations considered native and those considered foreign, heterogeneous, who are racially or culturally stigmatized. This explains the attempts at ethnic cleansing witnessed in Eastern Thrace after the Balkan Wars in Croatia in World War II, in Serbia in the 1990s and to a certain extent in Bulgaria at the time of the "Great Excursion" (1989). At the end of the 19th century the Balkan nations were the culprits deemed responsible for the tension in Europe. After the end of the wars fought for the unification of Italy and Germany, the Europeans thought complacently of themselves as immune to the bacilli of nationalism. Little did they know of the imminent world war which would shatter many of their illusions. Who was the sole reason for the immense bloodshed in civilized Northern France and Italy? The Balkan nations, namely the Serbians, of course.

After the Second World War there were two NATO countries in the Balkans, two members of the Warsaw Pact, one non-aligned country – Yugoslavia – and one country which kept to itself – Albania. Now we have 8 countries in NATO, 4 in the European Union, two are officially invited to join the European Union and for the moment one is not even considered for entry. Five countries are members of the Schengen Area and four have the Euro as their official currency, while at least two others use it alongside their own national currency. In recent years a number of researchers have claimed that what unites the Balkans, what makes them a self-contained entity, is a result of the dichotomy "us" and "them": that is, the comparison to Europe. The problem, however, is that the notion of "Europe" is hazy, difficult to define and does not include all European countries: for example, Russia is not part of the general image of Europe in any Balkan country. In most Balkan countries a strong inferiority complex is demonstrated in their relations with Europe. Is this only a complex? A common trait of the Balkan countries is their shared belief that they are the sacrificial lamb, sacrificed without any hesitation by the Great Powers on the altar of their own well-being and prosperity.

In the 20th century all Balkan countries without exception passed through a period of modernization based on the existing European model. In many cases this modernization was successful, at least to a certain extent, but in one it was a failure: the modernization of their political culture. We lack the space here to deliberate on the reasons for and factors in this failure. Suffice it to say that in this respect the Balkans are

not very different from most Mediterranean countries, such as Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Southern France.

When one looks at the Balkans and the dangers that arise to Europe from the East and South East, one cannot but think of the Roman limes – the broad belt of lands that were supposed to defend the cradle of the civilization from the onslaught of the Barbarian hordes. The task of the limes was to defend and, if necessary, to be the first to fall under the barbarian onslaught. In order to enable this the local aristocracy received certain rights, even Roman citizenship; and the Roman Empire invested considerable effort into modernizing infrastructure and bringing some of the benefits of the civilization to ordinary people who cherished the opportunity to live better than before. However, all of this came at a price, a price paid in blood. The limes sprang to life then and now it seems it did so not when the Empire flourished but when the already-tired Romans then and the Europeans now strove for calm and peace to enjoy their prosperity. They did not achieve it then. Do you think they will achieve it now? Let us point out that for some authors the Balkans are "the last rampart of Western Europe against the Moslem East".

To conclude: **"What are the Balkans?!"**

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Figure 1 Railways network in Europe (1870). Source: No Tech Magazine, 25 June 2012 https://www.notechmagazine.com/2012/06/the-european-railways-network-1870-2000.html