Oskar-Halecki-Vorlesung

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DIANA MISHKOVA

How the Balkans Came to Be: A Look from the Inside

Jahresvorlesung des Leibniz-Instituts für Geschichte und Kultur des östlichen Europa (GWZO)

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Edited by
Stefan Troebst

SANDSTEIN

Diana Mishkova

Diana Mishkova is a Professor of History and Director of the Centre for Advanced Study in Sofia. She is a corresponding member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and Doctor honoris causa of Södertörn University, Stockholm. Her research interests include South-east European history, intellectual history, area studies, and historiography. With her most recent books *Beyond Balkanism. The Scholarly Politics of Region Making* (London/New York 2018) and *European Regions and Boundaries. A Conceptual History*, edited with Balázs Trencsényi (London 2017), she makes an important contribution to ongoing debates about the making of space and historical regions. Her research invites us to rethink the premises of the "new area studies."

Oskar Halecki (1891–1973)

Born in fin-de-siècle Vienna as a Pole of Croatian origin, Oskar Halecki became one of the leading specialists in interwar Poland on medieval and modern history. At the International Congress of Historians in Brussels in 1923, he shaped the first European-wide debate on the design of the newly emerging historical sub-discipline of Russian and East European History. Forced into emigration in 1939, he founded in New York in 1942 the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in America (PIASA), which became the main centre of Polish historiography in exile during the Cold War. Halecki developed, while living in the United States, his meso-regional historical concept of East-Central Europe and published his seminal books *The Limits and Division of European History* (London, New York 1950) and *Borderlands of Western Civilization: A History of East Central Europe* (New York 1952).

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Preface

Stefan Troebst*

Diana Mishkova is the founder and Academic Director of the Centre for Advanced Study Sofia (CAS) and probably the most internationally connected Bulgarian scholar in the field of the humanities. Among other positions held, she is a foreign corresponding member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and most recently doctor honoris causa of Södertörn University in Stockholm. She has particularly close ties to German academe, having been, among others, a fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, the Imre Kertész Kolleg in Jena, and the Historisches Kolleg in Munich.

On the CAS website, she identifies an impressive array of areas of specialization: modern and contemporary history of Eastern Europe; comparative history of European nationalism; modernization of Southeastern European societies and the European peripheries during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; history of modern political ideas; European intellectual history; conceptual history, historiography, and theory of history; and methodology of comparative (historical) research.[1] Yet looking at the long list of her publications, quite a number of additional topics are apparent, such as how the decades of communist rule are remembered in present-day Bulgaria, how historians construct European meso-regions, or how narratives of medieval empires shape historiographies in the post-Byzantine realm until today.

Before looking at Diana Mishkova's most recent monograph to which the title of this lecture refers, a short remark on the immense significance of the Centre for Advanced Study Sofia, founded by her in 2000. CAS is one of the very few independent research institutions in Bulgaria in the field of the humanities and social sciences with a strong international and interdisciplinary orientation. It attracts young talents and outstanding senior scholars by offering institutional conditions conducive to the free pursuit of knowledge and dialogue in the framework of individual research fellowships or collaborative multidisciplinary and cross-cultural enquiries. Of the current and former staff at our institute, Jan Zofka, Augusta Dimou, Gilad Ben-Nun, myself, and others have indeed been intrigued by the work ongoing at the center.

In partnership with other institutes for advanced study, universities, scholarly and cultural associations, CAS works to re-establish the tradition of intellectual communities

* Stefan Troebst, a historian and Slavicist, was professor of East European Cultural History at Leipzig University and deputy director of the Leipzig Centre for the History and Culture of East-Central Europe (GWZO) until 2021. He studied at the universities of Tübingen, Sofia, Skopje, and at Indiana University in the USA and got his PhD as well as his habilitation from the Free University of (West) Berlin. He has published widely on the contemporary history of the Balkans, the cultural history of East-Central Europe and the early modern history of Northeastern Europe.

1 See page 2 of Diana Mishkova's CV on the CAS website: URL https://cas.bg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CV_DM_2020-eng.pdf.

and to facilitate open critical debate and exchange of people and ideas on national and transnational levels. Concerning this national—Bulgarian—level, in the words of Diana's colleague at the center, the economic historian Roumen Avramov, there is also something like a hidden agenda of CAS, which perceives itself as a "brain gain" institution opposing the post-1989 brain drain of younger Bulgarians to other parts of Europe and overseas:

> We are convinced that by providing a distinct/unique ambiance and milieu, we contribute indirectly, but efficiently, to the de-parochialisation of the Bulgarian scholarly community and to the adoption of the highest research standards. We find it very important that within CAS the Bulgarian scientists feel completely immune to career considerations or to pressures from the academic establishment: those are powerful tools in imposing conformism.[2]

As mentioned, the title of Diana's lecture—"How the Balkans came to be: A look from the inside"—refers to her recent monograph *Beyond Balkanism: The Scholarly Politics of Region Making*.[3] Here she turns the perspective of Maria Todorova's seminal study *Imagining the Balkans*[4] around in several ways. She looks, first, at how the Balkans looked at the outside world; second, at how the Balkans looked at themselves—in both cases with a focus on academic milieus; and third, at how scholars—not travelers, writers, politicians, journalists, and others—outside the Balkans looked at Europe's southeastern part, not least in Germany and especially in Leipzig.

Unsurprisingly, also Oskar Halecki (after whom the GWZO Annual Lecture Series is named) figures prominently in Diana's book: His integral concept of what he calls "East-Central Europe" is insofar exceptional as it includes, in addition to the Baltic countries, Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Romania, all of the Balkans due to their Christian-Byzantine heritage.[5] And speaking of Leipzig: Leipzig University is identified in the book as the role model for the emerging academic environments of Bulgaria and Romania, with scholars like the Slavicist August Leskien or the Romanicist Gustav Weigand as luminaries.[6] Furthermore, Leipzig's specific role in Nazi Germany as a center of research on the

2 E-Mail by Professor Roumen Avramov to the author, 22 August 2019, 11:29 hrs (re: MNI).

3 Diana Mishkova, *Beyond Balkanism: The Scholarly Politics of Region Making,* Abingdon: Routledge, 2018 (Routledge Borderland Studies). See also the book symposium "Reflecting on Diana Mishkova's *Beyond Balkanism: The Scholarly Politics of Region Making,*" in Südosteuropa 68 (2020), 432–476, as well as the review by Marie-Janine Calic in *Slavic Review* 78 (2019), 1055–1057.

4 Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997 (2nd ed. 2009).

5 Oscar Halecki, *Borderlands of Western Civilization: A History of East Central Europe,* New York: The Ronald Press Co., 1952.

6 Ulrich von Hehl, Uwe John and Manfred Rudersdorf (eds.), *Geschichte der Universität Leipzig 1409–2009*, vol. 4: *Fakultäten, Institute, Zentrale Einrichtungen*. 1st half vol., Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2009, passim.

Balkans is mentioned—with figures like the historian Georg Stadtmüller, who later on made a second career at Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich.[7]

In other words: This is a multifaceted book that can be strongly recommended not only to Balkanists and Southeast-europeanists but also to a whole array of others—specialists in area and transregional studies, in intellectual history, or in processes of spatialization under the global, European, and other conditions and even scholars dealing with the history of Leipzig and its university.

Let me conclude with a very short (and very Balkanist) quotation by the Greek surrealist poet Nikos Engonopoulos from his 1946 collection *The Return of the Birds*, which when translated into English reads: "this is no fun and games: / this is the Balkans."[8]

7 Thomas Şindilariu, "Die wissenschaftlichen Anfänge von Georg Stadtmüller. Motive und Grenzen der Integration in den Wissenschaftsbetrieb des NS-Staates," in *Ungarn-Jahrbuch* 26 (2002/2003), 95–124.

8 Quoted from Vangelis Calotychos, *The Balkan Prospect. Identity, Culture, and Politics in Greece after 1989*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 15.

How the Balkans Came to Be: A Look from the Inside

Diana Mishkova

For those not necessarily interested in the vicissitudes of Balkan history yet concerned with the way humanities scholars make sense of their spatial units of analysis, the paradigmatic European historical region of the Balkans continues to exert a pull. As the title of this lecture suggests, my response to this seduction can be, and has been, read as an undisguised riposte to the "balkanist" take on the notion of the Balkans in that it engages with the understandings of the Balkans that have emerged from within the region, specifically from academically embedded discursive practices and political usages. My insistence on the importance of scientific knowledge in the construction of the Balkans as an entity springs not simply from its omission in discussions of the western balkanist discourse. While we can easily recognize that—compared to media, travelogues, and fiction, the main production sites of public "balkanism"—scholarship plays a lesser role as a channel of disseminating intercultural images and that scholarly discourse obeys rules that restrict overt political or ideological implication, it nevertheless performs the critical function of providing the resources for legitimization and "empowering" political discourses. After all, knowledge as power is taken to be a natural consequence of the inability of the Orient, or the Balkans, to create its own self-representation.

Ideally, then, one should consider in parallel and interaction both extraregional and intraregional expert conceptualizations of the Balkans. This I had tried to do elsewhere, in a book entitled *Beyond Balkanism* and published last year. For the sake of this lecture, I shall only briefly sketch some aspects of the external expert/academic engagement with the region and, in the course of the subsequent exposé, detect certain connections or disjunctions with the local discourses.

Scholarly interest in the Balkans as a distinct geographical and cultural area, and even its perception and naming as a single region, does not predate the early nineteenth century. The geographical notions of the "Balkan peninsula," "the Balkans," and "Southeastern Europe" were late coinages of non-local origin, whereas the dominant appellation until almost the end of the nineteenth century was a political one—"Turkey in Europe" or "European Turkey"—associated not so much with a fixed territory as with the geopolitical implications of the so-called "Eastern question."

The institutionalization of the study of the Balkans both inside and outside the region came about in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries along with the ultimate disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. In the constitution of Balkan studies as a distinct

academic field, scholars from the Habsburg realm, practitioners of Austrian *Volkskunde* in particular, played the leading role. At the turn of the twentieth century, Vienna was the major European center for research in Balkan languages, ethnography, history, and culture.

The German interest in the region built on a pre-existing notion of *Mitteleuropa*, formulated in the 1840s, in which the vision of a strong Central Europe already included the Balkan peninsula as a German sphere of interest. Its ramifications, however, were at different removes from the centers of power. At the end of the nineteenth century, Germany was at the forefront of the institutionalization of Byzantine studies as an autonomous and rigorous scholarly discipline as well as of Ottoman studies, which until after World War II were dominated by German-speaking and Hungarian scholars. Not only did the systematic and inclusive conception of Byzantine and Ottoman studies encompass the whole Balkan peninsula, but also these studies approached the research field of Southeastern Europe "from the other side"—from the point of view of Constantinople/Istanbul—for which the southeast was the northwest. This was a significant shift of perspective in itself, which was also capable of counterbalancing the "one-sidedness" of the Central European viewpoint.

Along with Vienna, one should note the central role of Leipzig around the turn of the century in promoting comparative Balkan linguistics, folklore, and ethnography. Almost all Bulgarian philologists and ethnographers in the period preceding World War I were students of the Leipzig-based Slavicist August Leskien and the linguist Gustav Weigand, whereas almost all prominent Serbian historians before and after the war were trained at the University of Vienna.

French and British scholarly input was far less systematic and formative considering Balkan studies. The French academic approach to *les Balkans* was shaped mainly by fears of the "pan-German" economic and political thrust in the area. This explains the French preoccupation with the South Slavs, who were portrayed as the moral, political, and racial opposite—and the strategic counterforce—to the Germans.

British attention to the region as well was provoked above all by German and Russian expansion, Ottoman decay, and political crises in the region. Most of the British-Balkan "experts" were Liberals who advocated the elimination of imperial rule and the erection of independent nation-states as the only remedy to the problems of the Balkan nations. For Russia, on the other hand, studying the Balkan religious and ethnic brethren—*edinovertsy i edinoplemenniki*—meant not only extending Russian influence in the region but also bolstering Russia's historical consciousness, Slavic identity, and imperial status in a context where such ambitions increasingly became attached to obsession with the glories of antiquity. The emphasis Russia put on Slavo-Byzantine studies signified the close links between Russia's interest in Balkan ancient history and contemporary Russian imperial identity.

Up until World War II, extraregional academic perspectives continued to draw on geopolitical and imperial projects, and the tendency to treat the Balkan or Southeastern European states en bloc had, as a rule, political and economic incentives. Discrete national academes, however, participated with varying weight and proficiency in such conceptu-

alizations. On the whole, although proximity and imperial expansion ensured the almost uninterrupted German political and economic involvement in the area, German-language scholarship contributed most to the extensive and painstaking study of the region and the stabilization of the Balkans and/or Southeastern Europe as a historical region. For the better part of the pre–World War II period, the British interest in the area was aligned with the framework of the "Near East," which put the whole Balkan *problématique* in a specific light. However, the relationship between imperialism (or strategic interest) and academic engagement was not necessarily a straightforward one. While the larger British, French, and (later) American geopolitical stakes determined to a great extent the scale of academic investment, Italian blunt imperialist pursuits in the region in the interwar period failed to engender academic interest, and Russian imperial cartography operated with various configurations: the Slavic world, the Balkans, or a satellite Eastern Europe.

Within the region, we can analytically distinguish four periods of academic regionalization:

1.

It is quite significant that the first regional self-representations emerged as parallel identity projects amidst the dynamic phase of European nation-state building. The period of the ultimate dismantling of "Turkey in Europe" at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, which was marked by radicalization of national discourses, also saw the inception of an encompassing Balkan and Southeastern European entity. Nation-state building and the construction of an overarching regional unity at the time went hand in hand and were compatible.

Different disciplines participated with varying weight in creating Balkan regionality and in defining its attributes. In the origin of the Balkans as a unitary notion, the then vanguard comparative linguistics played a key role. Today, the "Balkan linguistic area" or "league"—*Balkansprachbund*—is considered as "the first area of contact-induced language change to be identified as such" and the model prototype for language interaction and convergence. Linguists were the first to use the term "balkanism" to indicate, contrary to the present-day resignification of the term, the opposite of fragmentation: a lexical and, more importantly, grammatical "feature shared among the unrelated or only distantly related languages of the Balkans"—Balkan Slavic, Balkan Romance, Albanian, Greek, and Balkan Turkish dialects. Such morphological similarities among the Balkan languages, which were first observed by the Habsburg philologists Jernej Kopitar and Franz Miklosich, came to be increasingly interpreted as testimony to "centuries of multilingualism and interethnic contact at the most intimate levels."

The linguistic approach to the Balkans stirred other academic fields to turn their attention to phenomena like contact, interaction, and convergence. According to Nicolae Iorga, Romania's foremost historian before World War II, regional history revealed a number of similarities strikingly reminiscent of the Balkan linguistic union. Iorga postulated the existence of a "fundamental unity resting on archaic traditions," a particular culture

and heritage common to the whole European southeast. Iorga claimed that this unity was drawing upon the great Thraco-Illyrian-Roman tradition, had been epitomized by Byzantium and later the Ottoman Empire, and was enshrined in a wide range of common institutions. On their part, literary scholars like the Bulgarians Ivan Shishmanov and Boyan Penev or the Romanian Ioan Bogdan charted massive ethnographic, folkloric, and literary borrowings that undermined the romantic notion of national uniqueness and shaped a space of cultural osmosis based on long-standing coexistence and interaction.

The commonalities on the level of grammar, syntax, belief, and popular lore, in turn, seemed to imply an underlying primeval unity in the way of thinking, mentality, and the unconscious. This trend evolved contemporaneously with the upsurge of psychological discourses and disciplines of comparative folk psychology and national characterology. One of the outcomes of such studies was the notion of a "Balkan mentality," whose diffusion, however, was not due—as is commonly claimed—to dubious academic fashions external to the region that tended to portray the Balkan cultures as a sanctuary of patriarchal practices and lifestyles long extinct elsewhere in Europe. In fact, it was the Serbian anthropogeographer Jovan Cvijić, who for the first time, at the beginning of the twentieth century, implemented this "scientific/psychological" approach to the Balkans—by the way, to be later taken on board by Fernand Braudel—elaborating on the link between the mental constitution of populations and geographic factors.

2.

The interwar period saw the rise of new paradigms promoting ontological and cultural-morphological models for explaining spatial similarities and differences. They were less concerned with interaction and diffusion between nations, so characteristic of the previous period, than with devising some common cradle and shared structures for these societies. That was the aim of the "new science of balkanology," driven by several Yugoslav and Romanian scholars. "The time has come," wrote the editors of the Belgrade-based new journal *Revue internationale des études balkaniques*, "to contemplate the coordinating of national academic Balkan studies, giving them cohesion and, above all, orienting them towards the study of a Balkan organism that constituted one whole since the most distant times" (Milan Budimir and Petar Skok) and elucidating "the elements of Balkan interdependence and unity" (Victor Papacostea).

The major forces of "Balkan aggregation" were found to be the Macedonian dynasty, the Romans, the Byzantine Empire, and the Ottoman Empire. Significantly, the role of "the Turks" in imposing social, political, and mental cohesion on the whole region was seen as the most salient. At a time when the national historiographies were busy eliminating the Ottoman features from the national cultures, scholars of the Balkans endeavored to reverse the notion of the region as the Ottoman legacy in Europe. They did so not by asserting an inherent difference from the Ottomans, but by inverting and even praising the Ottoman "primitiveness" and the segregation of the Christians under Ottoman rule as prerequisites for the preservation and development of the unique Balkan virtues and

potential. The tacit implication of this kind of argument was that—had the Turks been more advanced, that is, more like the West—the culture and identity of the Balkan Christians would not have survived.

This reading differed substantially from that informing contemporary western writings, which continued to describe the Ottoman rule as an aberration and unmitigated disaster—a black "yoke" that was held responsible for all the ills that plagued the development of the Balkan states. In this regard, the western scholars of the Balkans found themselves in the same camp with the Balkan nationalists, not the Balkan regionalists.

Even more remarkably, Balkan regionalists considered the (western idea of) nationhood as a misplaced importation that brought about the disruption of an organic society. "The principle of nationality, and later the right to self-determination," Romanian medievalist Victor Papacostea wrote, "has not found in our area the right time and the right solution. Created in the West and for the West, the idea of national states was borrowed by or enforced on the Balkans ...; no attempt was made to adapt this idea to the conditions of our region .... It is hard to find another example in world history that reveals more clearly the catastrophic consequences of the blind application of an idea in disregard for the major natural realities." Against the tendency of framing the Balkans in terms of nationalist discord, Balkan regionalists underscored the "unnaturalness" of nationalism and the difficulties it encountered in the region. Such a view, predictably, was unpopular outside the region. Arnold Toynbee was one of the very few western scholars who shared the view that the application of the utterly exceptional western formula of making language the basis for political demarcation to the intermixed populations of the Balkans and the whole Near East had resulted in huge human suffering and massacre and, as he put it, "diminishing returns in happiness and prosperity."

From such positions, Balkan regionalists developed the theoretical and methodological parameters of the new science of balkanology. Its domains outline a truly interdisciplinary field of study: from history, linguistics, and folklore to anthropology, demography, statistics, and human geography to economic development, law, the arts, architecture, and literature. It is indeed remarkable that a genuine blueprint for what would come to be called "area studies" after World War II, aimed at "total knowledge" by combining the humanities and social sciences, originated in the 1930s in the region itself.

On the symbolic level, the shift was no less stunning. Precisely at the time when the western discourse of balkanism reached its peak—when, as Maria Todorova put it, the Balkans became increasingly "recreated as an abstract demon" and the ultimate internal European "Other"—in the local regional context the term "Balkans"—and being Balkan—underwent systematic rehabilitation and veritable thriving as both a political and cultural concept. The movement toward a "Balkan Conference" and "Balkan Pact," the founding of "Balkan institutes" to conduct "Balkan research," and the appeals for a "Balkan fatherland" and "Balkan patriotism" converged in the slogan "the Balkans for the Balkan peoples." Accordingly, this new political concept was in explicit opposition to "Southeastern Europe", which was found to be an artificial and "faceless" coinage.

This forceful rearticulation was aimed not at circumventing the Western balkanism but at directly confronting and emasculating it. Next to laying the grounds for a new study field, interwar balkanologists sought to resignify the Balkans and turn its Orientalist semantics on its head through a series of para-historical statements about a primeval and essentially unchangeable Balkan soul, regenerated Balkan culture, a proper cultural orientation and global mission as well as a regional self-reliance and a self-sufficiency. The Balkans they tried to promote was not just a cultural-historical and socioeconomic entity but an axiological category—one that embodied a peculiar value system underlain by cultural and moral elements.

This went beyond coping with stigma and overturning self-stigmatization. Interwar academic balkanism strived to supply the conceptual toolkit and the authoritative scholarly basis for the construction of a Balkan identification. While not denying the still persisting power of the nation-state, this balkanism pursued a more encompassing, regionally anchored collective identity. In the process, the Balkans gelled into a discrete civilizational sphere, occasionally underpinned by overt racism and couched in moralizing, oratory or metaphysical, even mystic references. Ironically, this representation borrowed heavily from the then fashionable ethno-ontological discourse praising ethnic authenticity, organicity, and autarchy.

In essence, the interwar "Balkan idea" was an emancipatory one. It was an attempt at offsetting the impotence of small statehood in the geopolitical environment of the 1930s. "To protect the Balkans as one entity, to preserve it for the Balkan peoples themselves," wrote the founders of the *Balkanski institut* in Belgrade, "this today is the only true and the greatest national idea. Our patriotism, if it wants to be real, should be a Balkan patriotism." Furthermore, the Balkan idea, as conceived at that time, removed the compulsion to choose and define the identity of the Balkans between the poles of Europe and Asia. It asserted the existence of a "strong and irreducible Balkan individuality," which valorized in-betweenness, liminality, and complexity. It sought to subvert the Western notion of progress, where different communities trod towards the pinnacle of history occupied by "the West." It professed a proper, Balkan time axis, leading from the deepest past to the present and future, where universal ancient virtues—the bedrock of European civilization—were continuously re-enacted. Accordingly, "The Balkan Other [was] re-imagined as the West's anthropological Utopia, as the Westerner's alternative, or possible self"; he (or she) appeared as "considerably more gifted, more admirable, and even more appealing than the average, banal Westerner" (Sorin Antohi).

It is worth noting that such self-representation tallied with a conspicuous strain in Central European and Western literature at that time that estheticized Balkan underdevelopment, spontaneity, and artlessness. Arguably, this convergence of perspectives was the outcome not of imitation, but of a flow of ideas and concepts between East and West. The common intellectual context where this took place—and which brought together thinkers as different in other respects as the German Slavicist Gerhard Gesemann, British historian Robert William Seton-Watson, and Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset—was one shaped by civilizational anxiety and unease with what was

defined as the "moral poverty of the West." These thinkers all saw in the "pristine Balkans" a way of exploring the contemporary challenges to the self-assurance of the West and of expressing the widely shared feeling of estrangement from modern life. From this perspective, engagement with the Balkans, both inside and outside the region, was a way of engaging with wider domestic and transnational debates about the fate of Western modernity and progress.

3.

After World War II, the Balkans as a political notion all but disappeared. Nor was it considered a discrete economic region such as Eastern or Western Europe. It survived as a cultural-historical space plowed by a cluster of historically oriented human sciences and as a terrain for exercising the soft power of cultural diplomacy. The proliferation of regionalist organizations and the consolidation of Balkan studies as an autonomous field in the 1960s brought together cultural politics, geopolitics, and national propaganda and marked a new wave of politicization of Balkan research.

The major themes organizing the balkanist academic discourse during those years were ethnogenesis and ethnocultural continuity, the impact of empires, the sources of backwardness and modernization, and relations with "Europe." These themes were approached from strongly normativist positions, marked by evolutionism, Eurocentrism, and teleological thinking. Unlike their predecessors, the postwar balkanists showed no enthusiasm for devising a "Balkan" road to modernity. The neo-Marxist "dependency," "world-economy," and "core-periphery" paradigms did not produce visible resonance in the region in contrast to other parts of Eastern Europe. The same applied to contemporary nationalism studies. The comparative treatment and theoretical elaboration of nationalism from materialist positions bringing together the (post-)Ottoman and (post-) Habsburg space was left to scholars from Central Europe. The dominant telos-driven approach to modernization required comparisons of the local "stages of development" with those in the capitalist west rather than with the socially and economically "deviant" neighbors or other peripheries.

As a general rule, regional scholars tended to stress particular aspects of the "common Balkanness" where "their" nation could claim a special contribution. The periods that, in theory, featured as crucial for Balkan historical unity were compartmentalized in similar national chunks. It was common to offer selective Greek, Bulgarian, or Serbian perspectives to the Byzantine Empire, employing a deliberately ethnicized concept of folk and culture, or to parcel the study of the Ottoman Empire into "Greek", "Bulgarian," or "Serbian" lands within teleological national narratives. Balkan studies were, in this sense, a virtual playground of "methodological nationalism." Not surprisingly, the "regional approach" did not affect the writing of national history, which remained a self-contained, didactic, and parochial field.

Remarkably, communication across the Iron Curtain was made possible precisely by the consensually shared national framework of history writing and by neither side sub-

jecting the national paradigm to any critical scrutiny. The US journal *Southeastern Europe* regularly published thematic issues devoted to key national anniversaries featuring the diehards of the Balkan national historiographies. Albeit less consistently, the same was true of the German journal *Südost-Forschungen*. The "historical Balkans" thus came to be understood as a mosaic of national spaces validated by immutable ethnic or national communities fully conscious of their distinct character. Unlike interwar balkanology, its postwar continuation never went as far as to interrogate the basic theoretical premise of the discipline: the construction of boundaries per se. Overall, Balkan studies remained isolated from the theoretical and methodological debates taking place since the 1970s in general history and the social sciences, especially in political economy and nationalism studies, in both western and eastern Europe.

4.

Finally, the post-1989 period has been characterized by a theoretical clash over the meaning of the Balkans. In reaction to the revived discourse of "balkanism" in the wake of the Yugoslav wars of succession, some scholars, coming mainly from literary and cultural studies, sought to argue for the Balkans not as a product of geography, history, or culture but as a "'place' in a discourse-geography." A great deal of the research after the mid-1990s has centered around the nature of this discourse as well as how it was established, its characteristics, and its critique. But there are also those who have continued the search for the historical or cultural "reality" of the Balkans, variously defined in terms of a cluster of structural and cultural characteristics or historical legacies. The theoretical discussions the Balkans gave rise to placed the area at the center of the debates on the meaning of regions and the mechanisms for the production of space that has led to interrogating definitions, traits, and boundaries.

In his *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology* Paul Veyne quotes geographer Heinrich Schmitthenner saying that"[t]o want to find the 'real' regions is to want to square the circle." This, Veyne comments, does not mean that the concept of region is a mere fancy but that regions are a question of the point of view. Regions are, therefore, an immanently controversial and contested concept, the "scientific" definition of which has caused many problems for those trying to have their regional schemes accepted as more valid than others.

So, what can we actually learn from the Balkan case about the production of regions itself? The entanglement of politics with scholarship appears as a major propeller of region making. The politicization of scholarly regionalisms related to, on the one hand, the great European states' economic and political interests in this area and, on the other, various local nationalist or federalist schemes typically conceived in response to external or domestic political pressure. Balkan regionalist projects were steeped in diametrically opposed value systems: conservative, national-liberal, Marxist, social constructivist, etc. When we talk about supranational frameworks, we tend to believe that we are referring to politically "progressive" projects. Many regional schemes, however, spoke on behalf of far more ambiguous political stances. Consequently, the Balkans could be referred to as

the root of European civilization or be envisioned as the driver of an alternative, anti-European value system; it could signify a younger Europe that would revitalize the old one or represent a stigmatizing notion denoting deficiency in civilizational terms, to be overcome by consistent efforts at Europeanization.

Yet the most enduring source of politicization of scholarly regional terminology is the fusion of regionalist and nationalist designs in the fields of politics, economy, or culture. The academic notion of the Balkans was construed in dialogue with national autarchy and nation-centered scholarly paradigms. The outcome was patently ambivalent: Balkan regionalism could at one time erode and at another reinforce national differences. The drive for methodological rescaling beyond the national often originated from essentially nationalist agendas. There is, indeed, no clear-cut difference; rather, there is a complex relationship between the conceptualizations of the national and the regional: Nationalist arguments may be adduced to buttress a regionalist framework, and a regional definition may serve to bolster a nationalist project.

Local regionalizations sometimes connected to and other times clashed with the regional discourses produced outside the region. To put it bluntly, as powerful as the post-Enlightenment "Western discourse" (or rather different national western discourses) of the European east and southeast might have been, it was neither the sole nor, at all times, the dominant "agent" of regionalization. As I tried to indicate, if only sketchily here, the flow of ideas, concepts, and narratives were never unidirectional. The ideas of scholars like Shishmanov, Cvijić, Iorga, Papacostea, Budimir, and Skok strongly influenced western conceptualizations. Sometimes they went beyond the understanding of the Balkans: Cvijić's influence is clearly attestable in both Fernand Braudel's conceptualization of the Mediterranean and the paradigm of *histoire des mentalités*. Iorga partook in both Karl Lamprecht's project of *Weltgeschichte* and the "new cultural history" that prepared the ground for the Annales school. Such cases of knowledge transfer bespeak a movement of concepts and ideas that, although being asymmetrical, breaches the rampant view of a monodimensional west-to-east pattern.

The Balkan case is also revealing in the way various disciplines are contributing to the production and life cycle of regions. Until World War II, linguistics, folklore, literature, and ethnography were much more important than history proper for the crystallization of the Balkans as a historical region. The upsurge of the social sciences and of divisions based on socioeconomic and political models after 1945 subsumed to a large extent Southeastern Europe under an Eastern European umbrella, undermining the Balkan narrative, which re-emerged with the "cultural turn" in the 1980s.

The recurrent and currently prevailing notion of the Balkans as based on the continuity of its history springs from the assumption that shared historical experiences within this geographical space necessarily produce a structural entity—a historical region—and even something like a regional identity. However, none of the "regional" historical experiences and legacies was exclusively a Balkan one, as they typically applied to much bigger political configurations; nor did they affect this geographical space as a whole and in the same degree. A closer look at individual historical periods suggests that most of the

so-called "defining characteristics" of the region were not incomparable with other regions—in Europe and beyond.

Moreover, social and demographic, religious, cultural and intellectual, or economic and political phenomena draw different lines, shape different zones, and render different regional "definitions." Diverging geographies also result from zooming differences—areas charted by criteria on the micro level (like marriage or hereditary patterns, gender relations, household and work organization, etc.) differ from those drawn on a macro level (state building, industrialization, urbanization, etc.). There is thus no single "shared" history that scholars can reify, that might be thought to produce a specific cluster of characteristics, or that could legitimately serve to construct a region. Instead, all histories encompass "multiple geographies." Conversely, tailoring academic research to established spatial categories tends to predetermine to a large extent its conclusions. The endless debates about the boundaries of the Balkans have been the result of not only differing political agendas or geographical determinism, but also the scholarly fallacy of projecting a spatial category coined at a particular time and for particular purposes backwards and forwards in time, where it sits uneasily with very different political and social realities.

Such challenges to the meaning of "regions" and the legitimacy of "area studies" — feeding as they are on postcolonial critique, sensibilities attuned to an increasingly globalized world, and new theories related to the social construction of space—inevitably raise hard questions about the rationale and future of regional research. I have to necessarily leave the tackling of these issues for another occasion, but let me now say the following.

Regions have not been overcome or made irrelevant by the demise of traditional "area studies" and the rise of the "new transnationalism." However, sustaining their relevance as a terrain of action and an object of study entails reconfiguring their meaning. A vessel-like concept of a historical region marked by objective criteria and a cluster of structural and cultural traits, or even legacies, should recede before a fuzzier, processual, and open-ended one. This means shifting the focus of discussion to the social, political, and intellectual mechanisms bringing about the materialization of space and borders and, most prominently, to human agency. In our time, "rage to de-construct has rather given way to a fuller and richer exploration of the capacity, and its limits, of people (and things) to act" (Michael Geyer). This most surely concerns academics, whose discourses are a powerful social mechanism for constructing space, whereby heuristic frameworks tend to crystalize into cognitive maps and political realities. If anything, the tradition of "academic balkanism" teaches us as scholars to appreciate the fragility, transience, and fuzziness of our units of analysis and the responsibility to the spatial categories we are using.

Selected Publications by Diana Mishkova

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Symposium on the book in *Südosteuropa* vol. 68, no. 3, 2020, 432–476.
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- *Rival Byzantiums. Empire and Identity in Southeastern Europe.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022 (forthcoming).

Edited Volumes

- *European Regions and Boundaries. A Conceptual History* (co-edited with Balázs Trencsényi), London: Berghahn Books, 2017.
- *'Regimes of Historicity' in Southeastern and Northern Europe, 1890–1945: Discourses of Identity and Temporality* (co-edited with Balázs Trencsényi and Marja Jalava), London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- *Entangled Histories of the Balkans*. Vol. 2: *Transfers of Political Ideologies and Institutions* (co-edited with Roumen Daskalov), Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014.
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In recent decades, the Balkan region has re-entered the academic and public discourse. "Backward", "violent", and "torn"—the image of the Balkans in the Western world is still characterized by prejudices, stereotypes, and stigmas. In the Oskar Halecki lecture, keynote speaker and Southeastern Europe expert Diana Mishkova takes upthese ideas, that are partly centuries old, and reverses the perspective by looking at the greater Balkan region from the inside out. How do the Balkans see themselves? And what significance has the (Western) external view here?

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SANDSTEIN