The Balkans and the International Construction of the Mediterranean

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Proposition

The Mediterranean, as its very name indicates, is a geographical reality, a landlocked sea. It is also a cultural and historical reality, derived from a time in which its inhabitants considered it their *Mare Nostrum-Our Sea*, and saw in it a cultural possibility. It is and can be a border sea, and it is and can be a sea of unity. And it can be these things because of the possibility of constructing it politically around its perception as a common space. For throughout its history the Mediterranean has been as evident in its presence as in its absence; its construction both as a bond and as a border, as a place in which we are who we are, which defines an us, and as a border sea that marks the place where the other begins, and where we encounter him.

Similarly, the Western Balkans do not constitute a differentiated political and geographical unity. Rather, they are the product of a historical creation from without, their differentiation based on orographic circumstance: the Balkans is a relatively recent denomination, in historical terms, that originated with the powers that, in the diplomatic congresses of the 19th Century, drew up maps to a large extent on what had until then been territories of the Ottoman Empire, which, together with the historians and academicians who wrote the history books, they later attempted to turn into reality. As Mark Mazower (2000) points out, during the 18th Century and the better part of the 19th, "Turkey in Europe" was the most common way of referring to the territories that later would be known as the Balkans, and before 1888 — the year of the Berlin Congress — it is rare to find texts referring to the Balkan peoples (indeed, for a long time they were known in the heart of the Ottoman Empire as Rumelia, or Rums — Romans — as this was the provenance of the peoples of ancient Byzantium). Nevertheless, by the start of the First World War, this had become the habitual way of referring to the region from the outside. Even though the term is based on a geographical referent, Mazower maintains that from the start the Balkans are more than a geographical concept:

> *From the very start the Balkans was more than a geographical concept. The term, unlike its predecessors, was loaded with negative connotations – of violence, savagery, primitivism – to an extent to which is hard to find parallel… Europe quickly came to associate the region with violence and bloodshed.* (Mazower, 2000: 4)

Though recent events could lead to a similar identification, only with difficulty can it be explained were it not for the Balkans' historically constituting the place where the lines dividing the us from the them have been drawn: between Catholicism and Orthodoxy, between Christianity and Islam. This allows for the differentiation from the rest of Europe of a zone that geographically is at the heart of Europe.

This is why to speak of the Balkans and the Mediterranean is indeed to speak of geography, but not only, or not even mainly. It is to speak of — and perhaps to be stakeholders in — one of the possible stories of history. The story of the Mediterranean as an object of international construction on the part of

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the political entities that agglutinate its inhabitants and all their relevant international actors. The story of the Balkans as a subject of international action in the Mediterranean. Which brings us to postulate the what, the why, the wherefore, and the how of that possible story of history.

To speak of the Balkans and the Mediterranean is indeed to speak of one of the possible stories of history. The story of the Mediterranean as an object of international construction on the part of the political entities that agglutinate its inhabitants and all their relevant international actors

To speak of the Balkans and the Mediterranean is to speak of certain facts — the entry of Albania into the Barcelona Process in November 2007, and later that of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro in the Union for the Mediterranean in 2008 — and of their potentialities.

And to consider these facts and potentialities, this possible version of history, in the light of the above interrogatives, we are going to embark on an intellectual journey through the Western Balkans and their collective and international dynamics vis-à-vis the Mediterranean, and through the Mediterranean as an object of international construction and of the Euro-Mediterranean Process (first the Barcelona Process, then the Union for the Mediterranean) as a path in this direction. We shall not lose sight of the fact that this journey is undertaken in a special moment of Mediterranean history, when the southern shore is traversing an Arab spring that obliges us, that brings home for us, the need to rethink everything.

On the Balkans and Their International Projection toward the Mediterranean

A Dual Point of Departure

On the one hand, as has already been noted, the Balkans did not construct themselves, but rather are constructed from without, in a process of singularization and differentiation of what had previously been common ground. Common, first of all, with the rest of the Roman Empire, and hence with the Mediterranean (known to its inhabitants as the *Mare Nostrum)*, then with the rest of Europe, and finally with the Ottoman Empire. A singularization precisely in order to differentiate them from the rest of the Ottoman Empire, whose centuries-long configuration constitutes one of the great historical events in the international configuration of the Mediterranean – for centuries fundamentally a question of the relationship between the Empire and the Christian powers – and whose disintegration lies at the origin of many of the contemporary geopolitical crises and tensions from the Middle East to the Balkans.

On the other hand, the Balkans are viewed as a point of encounter among cultures, civilizations, worlds, whose political articulation is conditioned by high-tension wires that divide and structure them and by factors and actors vis-à-vis which their organization into states constitutes a historical phenomenon that is both recent and often transcended by them: scraps of history that remain alive through history, beyond the life and death of the world that gave birth to them. Scraps, waves, or fluxes of history, the past and present of Romanization, which nevertheless ran up against Greek and Illirian linguistic resistance (hence Greek and Albanian/Illirian constitute, together with Basque, the only living languages that precede Latin); of the line of Theodosius, the emperor who in the year 395 divided the Roman Empire into East and West, which henceforth would be reflected in the Catholic and Orthodox worlds; of the Slavic invasions after which the Slavic peoples have co-existed in the region with Albanians and Greeks; of the Ottoman invasion and the dynamics of integration and resistance it generated, along with the Islamization of part of the population. Historical resistance or identitary continuity which, added to nationalistic trends and the weakening of the empire, laid the groundwork, from the Greeks on, for the process toward independence of the peoples of the region and their political organization into states. A process born, to be sure, as an act of orthodox solidarity through the support of Catherine the Great for the Greek independentists; and which as a geostrategic factor includes access to the Mediterranean for the central Slavic powers, and the presence, in the *Mare Nostrum*, of central powers such as the Russian or Austro-Hungarian Empires, the Germanic and Slavic worlds.

The culmination of this process was the political organization of the Balkan peoples and territories into states, in which two phases can be distinguished: first, the phase of their independence from the Ottoman Empire — and the Austro-Hungarian one — which came to a head following the First World War with the creation of the kingdom that in time would be transformed into the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Albanian state; second, the phase of the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. A process which, with the referent of Greek independence, accelerated at the time of the Congress of Berlin, spurred on by nationalisms and Catholic (Austro-Hungarian) and Orthodox solidarity toward the peoples of these religions, a context in which the Albanian case proved to be an exception. The coexistence in the heart of Albania of a Catholic north and an Orthodox south, a good portion of whose population are converts to Islam, means Albanian nationalism has been fundamentally cultural from the start, and its national construction and the affirmation of its collective identity developed around its language; Albanians supported the Rilindja movement, writing and schooling in Albanian, and basically claimed this class of rights from the Ottoman Empire along with the necessary political autonomy to attain them. The difficulty of achieving this, and the parallel advance of other nationalisms in the region, with expansionist tendencies and territorial ambitions, led to the proclamation of independence in 1912, and the struggle for territory in the Second Balkan War. The outcome of this would be the birth of Albania as an independent state with little more than half the territory and population of the *vilayets* — Ottoman provinces — in which the Albanians resided. Hence, the Albanian question and the Albanian factor in the thematics and dynamic of the agenda and collective action in the region was shaped by the Albanian population outside of Albania (in Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, the Presevo Valley, Northern Greece).

What is more, the construction of a state shared with the other peoples of the region had the potential to channel the tensions among them into a common federal project, but also the risk of seeing its potential for balance annulled by the ambitions of expansive national construction of its constituent peoples, Serb hegemony in particular. When Tito and socialism disappeared as a factor and discourse of cohesion, the narrative and its protagonists reverted to the nationalistic passions that took the relations between the peoples of the former Yugoslavia from a positive sum cooperation based on commonality to a zero sum confrontation based on the exaltation of difference. This led to the emergence of new states living side by side in a landscape with other factors in play. Fundamentally homogeneous states seen from an ethnic, religious, and identitary perspective; and pluralistic states such as Bosnia and Herzegovina or the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. In this landscape the "Serbian factor" and the "Albanian factor" made frequent appearances in the explanatory discourses of the regional dynamics.

Once the phase of armed conflict was overcome through a negotiated solution and the creation of new states, and with the perspective of European integration following the Thessaloniki European Council, the Balkans could envision the achievement of integration by means of the process of stabilization, association, and integration in the EU. In this way the EU — much like the Ottoman Empire in its day — is configured as the new external cohesion-builder, and European integration as the formula for surmounting national and identitary issues and tensions. Thus the transition to democracy and the rule of law is at once both a path toward and the means to become a Member State of the European Union.

The fundamental challenge of the Balkans is thus shaped as the construction of viable states and the management of the relationships between their peoples by means of cooperation instead of confrontation, which, in turn, presupposes:

- A shift from the construction of the State as a single power to the division of powers and the rule of law as the fruit of a social contract based on citizenship, that is, from the us of shared ethnicity or religion to the us of shared citizenship.
- European integration as a path to collective consensus. An essential element of such consensus, both the goal itself and the path or road map to collective action — constructing the Progress or Opinion Report of the Commission as a shared political program and a blueprint in the process of transformation — , this foreign policy objective is in turn an essential element of national construction, constituting the principal option and challenge of a shared future.

For when we are absorbed in an existence limited to ourselves, accustomed to perceiving international actors as internal actors, to being the object of international action; to exist before others, the other, be-

yond our own borders, directing our foreign policy and our collective action towards them, viewing ourselves as part of a larger us, wanting to construct ourselves with others, supposes a change of paradigm, of exposition. Like the Mediterranean where we have had a presence and which has been present in us; but where we have been politically absent. Such a situation implies a challenge of maturity, of evolution, of undertaking the external transition as both corollary and complement to the internal transition.
Such was the debate that enlivened Albanian foreign policy as it decided upon its candidacy for the Barcelona Process,[2] and such was the potential of the option for Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, as well as for other countries in the region.

Potentiality or Reality? Youth, First Experiences, Lessons and Potentialities of the Participation of the Balkans in the UfM and the International Construction of the Mediterranean

On the heels of a long period of isolation, when a country first emerges on the international stage as a state, forming part of those international organizations and forums to which one may belong by virtue of geographical location or idiosyncrasy constitutes a sign of external normalization, and showing the nameplate of one's own country in the assembly or council of an international organization constitutes in and of itself an achievement, an act of collective affirmation. To be a member, to participate, to be there, is the objective in itself. And it is satisfactory at first, to be there and to learn how things work. But time goes by and the question emerges as to why and what for, how does this affect me, where do I want this vehicle in which I am no longer just a passenger, but also a co-pilot, to go; and because I am in this vehicle I have taken on certain roads and certain goals, certain opportunities have opened up to me, and the challenge of taking advantage of them rises before me. Once I am in the Mediterranean diplomatically, what Mediterranean do I want? The question arises not only as to what the Mediterranean can do for me, but also as to what I can do for the Mediterranean.
As the group that has come to be known as the "neither/nors" – neither EU nor Arab Group, both of which have prior mechanisms of agreement, and one of whose members occupies a co-presidency – begins to exercise its participation in the UfM, the question posed above has begun to foster, in certain cases, a given expectation or potentiality that each of the Balkan states prioritizes in its participation. The promotion, for example, of the environmental conservation of the Mediterranean, in the case of Croatia, of the Euro-Mediterranean University in that of Slovenia, or of the valorization of the experience of harmonious inter-religious coexistence in a lay society in that of Albania. But if indeed such initiatives constitute first steps toward a response, the Mediterranean path of the Balkans is far from having exhausted all its potentialities. Many questions and answers are yet to be asked and answered – to be asked of ourselves and answered for ourselves –. For it is not only a question of being in the Mediterranean, but of what we want of it, what we want in it, what Mediterranean we want, what relations with its other member states we want, what role we can play in all this.
This last question brings us to the consideration of the role the Balkan states could eventually play among the non-EU states to help in surmounting the conditioning of Euro-Mediterranean construction by Arab-Israeli tension, which is both a challenge and a diplomatic option of particular relevance and potential.

The Union for the Mediterranean, the Process of International Construction of the Mediterranean, and the Balkans

Contemporary international construction of the Mediterranean finds its dual origin in its very geographical reality and in the external dimension of its European construction. A European construction that takes off in the decade of the 1950s when the Maghreb is still a French protectorate, awakening to independence at the same time as the Mediterranean policy of the EU. A policy that will then be transformed in the process and in a shared union with its partners in the rest of the Mediterranean, while never ceasing to sustain these partners, yet in some way never allowing that other shore to presuppose policy. A transformation that will involve the option of moving toward co-decision-making,

[2] See Montobbio (2009).

toward the construction of a shared us. An option influenced by the reference point of the creation of a zone of shared peace and stability in Europe starting with the Helsinki Act, continuing with the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the ensuing process toward its transformation into the OSCE upon the fall of the Berlin wall; influenced also by this fall, and by the necessary reconsideration and reequilibrium it entailed in the external construction of Europe — towards the east, but also towards the south — , as well as in the Middle East peace process that moved from Madrid to Oslo, and required commitment, and required a response. It would have been easy for this response on the part of the EU to be limited to the scenario of the peace process, in line with the prior differentiation that its Mediterranean policy established between the Maghreb and the Mashreq; but in that precise moment the ambition of geographic and thematic globality arose and gave birth to the Barcelona Declaration of November 1995 under the Spanish Presidency of the EU; an ambition that supposed a strategic option for the commonality of the Mashreq and the Maghreb, an option feasible in and for the entire Mediterranean. Without ignoring the concern of certain key states in the configuration of EU Mediterranean Policy as to whether the attention to and dedication of international resources, intended to foster the advancement of the peace process, might occur in detriment of the Maghreb. Hence, if indeed from its birth the concept of the Barcelona Process was meant to be extended to the entire Mediterranean, in effect and in practice it supposed an option to construct in the Mediterranean an us between the EU, the Arabs and the Israelis who inhabit it, and Turkey, a fundamental Mediterranean actor towards the past and towards the future, without which the international construction of the Mediterranean is impossible.

And what about the Western Balkans? They were not considered by the EU at the time to be a subject of international construction beyond their borders, but rather as the object of international action in their own territory, of conflict resolution once again in their own territory, the objective and challenge to European construction in the panorama of the broadest problematics of the consequences of the fall of the Berlin Wall. According to this logic, the relationship with the peoples of Europe who had previously been separated by the iron curtain is a problem of internal construction, and not one of the external construction of Europe, of integration in the common space and project, of the tracing of a path toward these objectives. A logic to which the establishment of the Copenhagen criteria, the affirmation of the European perspective of the Western Balkans in the European Council of Thessaloniki, and the process of stabilization and association and later integration that is opened from there on in and after pacification all respond.

A logic – as the case of Slovenia in fact shows – according to which the Western Balkans are destined to form part of the process of Euro-Mediterranean construction, in response to which it is worth asking "Why not now? Why, if they are Mediterranean peoples, must they wait to be European in order to be Euro-Mediterraneans?"

Nevertheless, since Thessaloniki the EU has been offering the Western Balkans the European perspective, but not the Euro-Mediterranean perspective. Hence not until Albania applied for entry into the Barcelona Process in 2006 did the EU seriously consider the integration of the Western Balkans in Euro-Mediterranean construction, thus transforming its dynamic and its geographic scope.

Perhaps because at heart logics and perspectives that have been treated as if they were parallel paths and separate sets, with their corresponding institutional reflection differentiated in the heart of the European commission and institutions, can in fact turn out to overlap and be a site of intersection – the logic of integration and neighbourliness, of the construction of Europe and of the Mediterranean; the DG Relex and the Commissioner of External Relations and the DG and the Comissioner of Enlargement. And nevertheless multiple states of belonging and intersections of sets are possible — often even indispensable, to be entirely frank. Intersections of interpretations, of processes, of instruments, and even of financial chapters. A question, this last, as was seen in the response to Albania's entry into the BP, that requires a clear distinction between the instruments and funds for development of the EU relationship with each of the Mediterranean states and the instruments for the construction of the Euro-Mediterranean and its regional programs – so that the former may be framed respectively within the Agreement on Stabilization and Association or the accession negotiations, or the IPA funds or in the Accord for Association and MEDA funds, depending on whether we are dealing with states with a European perspective or southern partners; and never-

theless that all might have access to the MEDA regional programs and those of the UfM or other common mechanisms such as the Anna Lindh Foundation. The ultimate dimension of such logics can be defined – as in its day the Cecchini Report on the cost of non-adoption of the internal market did – not only in terms of the advantages of being, but of the cost of not being, by asking ourselves – as we can do regarding non-integration in Europe in order to reach a definitive judgment as to its necessity – what is the cost of the non-Mediterraneity of the Western Balkans. For the Western Balkans, for the European Union, for the rest of the Mediterranean partners, for the Mediterranean itself.

Indeed, the option to be Mediterranean, to be stakeholders in and make a commitment to the participation of the Western Balkans in the international construction of the Mediterranean, as a subject and not only as an object, as a setting and value to be preserved, as a common geopolitical space of all its states and all its inhabitants, beyond the relationships we pose for all of them and for each one of them, individually or as a group – as in the case of the group of the Arab countries or the EU itself, is also an option for the Mediterranean. Making a commitment, having a stake in, the option for the assumption of Mediterraneity on the part of all: for the EU, beyond the necessity and challenge of confronting its own enlargement and its relationship with the southern shore of the Mediterranean; for the Western Balkans; for our southern partners. Which also supposes, in the case of the latter, the assumption of their common Mediterranean condition with the Western Balkans, with which until little more than a century ago they shared the common political space of the Ottoman Empire.

But if any historical question aims straight for our heart and our heads this spring, it is the one posed by the Arab Spring and its potential as a watershed of history, as the possible beginning of a story of history that could end, as never before, in a Mediterranean of peace and stability, democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights, shared development and prosperity, and interreligious and intercultural coexistence. One of the possible stories of this history – of the Arabs, the Europeans, the Turks, the Israelis, the Mediterraneans, of the construction of Europe and the Mediterranean – which demands that we be up to the task, that we give it and ourselves a chance. Every earthquake or rumble of history, every wave of democratization, fundamentally supposes a process of internal political change, but at the same time entails an external dimension; the need, opportunity, and challenge to take on an external transition as well. To change the world as our world changes. And the Mediterranean cannot help but change this spring. Many things will have to be rethought, everything will have to be rethought, in a critical consideration of the road travelled and constructed thus far, and we will have to ask ourselves how to improve our navigation toward those desired goals, that shared future, now that the winds of history are bringing us so close. Certainly the international construction of the Mediterranean is not the only possible international scenario or architecture through which to channel a renewed relationship between the EU and the Arab world; which will be more far-reaching, as the international construction of the Mediterranean is also more far-reaching. But this possible and desirable story of the history of the Mediterranean can also be one of sailing together on the Mediterranean toward the Mediterranean itself, of the return of the *Mare Nostrum* to the encounter with oneself, toward that identification between Mediterraneity and civilization; toward the affirmation of that common space, between all of us and for all of us. And by the same token, for the Balkans as well, in the Balkans, and for the Balkans.

For as María Zambrano said, man is the only being who not only suffers history but also makes it. And in response to the defeatists of the twilight of history and its storms, man can also write the story of history as he would like it to be, the better world that he would like to leave for his children. And the better Mediterranean.

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