Past and Present of Cultural Pluralism in the Balkans: Richness and Threats

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The Balkans are renowned for poor management of diversity rather than for the peaceful coexistence of its peoples, although both form part of its history. The Balkan Peninsula is usually presented as a frontier and a demarcation line of different traditions – Catholicism, Christian Orthodoxy and Islam – and also as an area of a problematic interrelation of different ethnic groups and peoples of Slavic, Latin, Finno-Ugric, Greek and Turkish origin. Yet, this mixture of races and beliefs, qualified by many as "explosive", has emerged throughout history as quite a homogenous modus vivendi.

A Crucible of Cultures: Advantages and Disadvantages of Cultural Pluralism

Beyond the conflict discourse, everyday life in the Balkans speaks for itself. The same dish, albeit sometimes with different names, appears in Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian Muslim, Albanese, Bulgarian, Greek or Rumanian gastronomy as witness of a long cultural interchange, practised despite religious, ethnic or linguistic differences. The same songs, probably of a Jewish or Armenian origin, make up the Greek, Bulgarian, Serbian, Bosniac (Bosnian Muslim), Rumanian and even Hungarian and Ukrainian cultural heritage.

The Balkan Peninsula represents a conglomerate of regional cultures, such as the Danubian (in his work *Danube*, Claudio Magris speaks of a true Danubian *koine* which characterises all the peoples living on the banks of this river, from Germany to Rumania-Bulgaria), the Carpathian culture (a traditionally egalitarian society distinguished by the richness and metallurgic exploitation and the rooting of craftsmanship in precious metals and metalwork from prehistoric times) and the Mediterranean (located between Greece and Rome, the peoples of the Adriatic and Ionic coast are distinguished by the love for and dedication to the sea, light and form). Moreover, in Balkan music you can feel the background beat of a melancholia which has to do with Asian influences (Turkish, Armenian and even Indian), melted in that crucible of cultures.

It is generally said that the Balkan Peninsula produces more history than it is capable of consuming. The peninsula, rather

than producing its own history, has been the victim of historical processes led by major political conglomerations and power centres which entered into conflict in the middle of its territory. Balkan destiny has mainly been defined by geography. Its central location in Europe and its character as a bridge towards Asia made it suffer from the several upheavals in its surroundings: every time Europe and the world reorganised themselves, strong after-effects were felt in the Balkans.

The advantages of a society based on cultural pluralism are clear. In the first place, a wide and varied education raises awareness of the fundamental relationship between culture and development

In the 4th-century, in the period of Emperor Justinian, when the Roman Empire was divided into two hemispheres, the western and the eastern, Greek and Latin, the frontier was fixed in the middle of the Western Balkans (in the area of the current Bosnia). Some centuries later, that area also saw the dispute over the frontier between the Austrian-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires. The tragedy of being a border area is clearly seen in the fate of a Balkan people of a southern Slavic origin that belongs to the so-called Dinaric race: despite using a single language, this people writes using two different alphabets (Cyrillic was introduced by Greek-Byzantine missionaries and Latin by the Church of Rome) and defines itself in three ethnic variants: Serbians, Croatians and Muslims (Bosniacs). Among the diverse cultural elements which define them, religious belief is the only difference: some are Orthodox Christians, some Catholic Christians and others Muslims. This people, divided into three, formed part of different political groupings in conflict with each other throughout history. However, on several occasions in the 20th-century, this people or these three ethnic groups came together in a single state, forming multicultural societies of the kingdom of Serbians, Croatians and Slovenians and, later, the first and the second Yugoslavia.

The periods of peaceful coexistence in the Balkans and right uses of multiculturality have been poorly reflected by the media: it is even common to refer to the recent Yugoslavia in terms of dictatorship and oppression, lack of freedom and rights. Nevertheless, the former Yugoslavians recall it as a period of unity, fraternity, solidarity, openness and multiethnic construction of a shared future. It was a European country open to the East and to the West, politically close to the countries of Africa, Latin America and Asia, with which it had fostered the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries against any type of imperialism (for instance, the NATO and Warsaw Pact military blocs). In Yugoslavia, the neighbours used to jointly celebrate the festivities: Catholic and Orthodox Christmas, Ramadan, as well as other festivities instituted during the communist era. This society, egalitarian in its base, multilingual and multi-religious, was a model of peaceful coexistence, with a high degree of participation and citizen security, mutual respect and intercultural dialogue.

The advantages of a society based on cultural pluralism are clear. In the first place, a wide and varied education raises awareness of the fundamental relationship between culture and development. Development is measured by the level of openness, empathy and dignity with which you have learnt to live. Plural societies are more creative,

intelligent and sensitive than monocultural ones. In them, difference is seen as inspiring and enriching, providing knowledge about oneself and the others, while solipsism is interpreted as inhibiting and destructive. Yugoslavian society, for instance, allowed the nationalities and ethnic groups that formed it to preserve their cultural and social identities, thereby truly and not officially constructing a plural society resting on the diversity of views, nuances and ways of understanding life. A totality and a unity were simultaneously perceived: there was a social identity and a project of a shared future.

The Turkish word Balkans (Balkan), which means "mountain", was neither the only nor the most frequent name of this region until the mid-19th-century

There were also periods in which cultural pluralism in the Balkans emerged as a disadvantage: in times of world economic crises, hegemonic thirst and destabilising practices, multicultural societies appeared especially vulnerable. It was enough to emphasise the differences rather than the equalities and start to praise determined models of society-nation-culture in comparison to other types which were used as a contrasting example in order to profoundly unbalance a multicultural community. These practices emerged in the periods prior to the First and Second World Wars, as well as in the years following the fall of the Berlin Wall, in the case of the Western Balkans. In the late 20th-century, peoples and nations that had coexisted in peace for half a century within Yugoslavia collided again: Croatians against Serbians, Serbians against Albanese, Albanese against Greeks, Bulgarians against Macedonians, etc. From those times of crisis and misuse of multiculturality a vocabulary has remained which is used when talking about Balkan identity. According to this, the "powder keg" and "Balkanisation", the consequences of the millenary "Balkan hatred", are the witnesses of the threat represented by multiculturality.

The Balkan Being and the Discourse on the Balkans

To designate the mountain which gives the Balkan Peninsula its name, British writers prior to John Morritt (1794) used in their travel novels the Thracian name *Hemus* (*Aemus* among ancient Greeks, *Haemus* or *Haemi Montes* among Romans). The name *Balkans*, although appearing in some texts from the 16th-century, was not habitually used. This name of an Ottoman origin, as a kind of neologism of pejorative connotation, was used in parallel to the Byzantine *Hemo, Aimos, Emmon, Emmona,* which, in its turn, evoked the Thracian, Illyrian, Roman and Greek cultural heritage of the peninsula. The Turkish word *Balkans (Balkan),* which means "mountain", was neither the only nor the most frequent name of this region until the mid-19th-century. Although the German geographer Johann August Zeune introduced the name "Balkan Peninsula" in 1808, until the Berlin Congress (1878) names such as the "European Turkey", the "European Ottoman Empire", the "European Orient" or the ethnic labels "Greek Peninsula", "Greek-Slavic Peninsula", "Peninsula of the Southern Slavs" or "South-East Europe". Ottoman Turks called this territory *Rum-eli*, which means

"land of the Romans" (that is, the Greeks), as well as *Ottoman Europe*.

At present, to designate which states belong to the Balkan Peninsula a single geographical criterion is not used. There is a tendency to regard as Balkan those countries which were under Ottoman rule between the 14th and 20th centuries, thereby linking anything Balkan to eastern cultural influences. Most of the countries in the Peninsula in question do not recognise themselves as "Balkan" and prefer the label "central European", which reveals the practice of stigmatisation applied to that peninsula and the East in general.

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The discovery of the Balkan Peninsula as a geographical, social and cultural entity took place in the late 18th-century, as shown by numerous literary works written by European travellers. The European part of the Ottoman Empire took on its own specific physiognomy, worthy of attention within the framework of the blooming of literary production in industrialised Europe and the development of printing. The reading public enthusiastically consuming stories of exotic places began to grow. Thus, the Balkans, until then considered merely as an Ottoman province or a fertile field for archaeological research, were considered as a dreamful place, the ideal setting for unusual social events, political adventures and romantic love affairs. The image of the Balkans emerging from these early writings is positive: the peninsula appears as an exotic romantic space, full of ruins from ancient cultures, heroism, love and passion.

However, in the early 20th-century, in the political context of the preparations for the First World War, the perception of the Balkans changed. A conventional image of the Balkan Peninsula was established which in different European national literatures has the same characteristics. The knowledge acquired on this region is classified and typified in the essentialisation process, whose objective is to emphatically distinguish between the Balkans and Europe. Throughout the 20th-century, in literary, analytical and journalistic texts, the Balkans appeared linked almost exclusively to concepts such as violence, savagery, tyranny, nationalism, Nazism, discord, greed, primitivism, brutality and barbarism. The stigmatisation of the Balkans, consumed in the irreversible contempt for "Balkanness" in comparison to "Europeanness", explains how a neutral label – a geographical term – has finally become an insult. Gradually, the adjective "Balkan" ceased to designate a geographical territory as the homologous terms "Iberian" or "Italic/Apennine" (Balkan Peninsula, Iberian Peninsula, Italic Peninsula) and started to enclose a metaphorical meaning of a pejorative nature. The "Balkan" became the synonym of the "primitive", "backward", "tribal", "uncivilised" and, above all, "conflictive", attributing to the region the status of the unfortunate Other of Europe, a collateral damage of modern and civilised Europe. According to this discourse, the Balkans have a *bordering* position in Europe and, therefore, its nature is *polarised*, divided

between the East and the West (between civilisation and barbarism).

Some authors argue that Balkanism (the discourse on the Balkans) is a derivative or a branch of Orientalism (the discourse on the Orient, described by Edward Said in 1978) and that the latter acts within Europe itself, "between European 'proper' and those parts of the continent which were under the Ottoman (hence Eastern) rule." It seems that thanks to the existence of the Orentialist rhetoric (Orientalism) the "Balkan" is finally opposed to the "European", as "Balkanness" is interpreted as a "Europeanness stained by the Oriental" which stands out on the background of a "clean Europeanness."

This identity attributed to the Balkans, however, clashes with the image that the Balkan peoples have of themselves. They do not understand how some Westerners, who consider Greek rationalism and Christianity as pillars of their own culture, could have treated the tradition from which they come in this way. All historical-cultural development of the Balkans was carried out under the direct and continued influence of Greece (both ancient and Christian), the one which had provided Rome with uncountable emperors and patricians. Balkan culture was for one millennium of the Byzantine period the reserve of Hellenistic tradition fused with the legacy of Saint Paul and continues to be so today. The Balkans, the land of Orpheus, Dionysius or Spartacus, see themselves as the "cradle of European culture." Moreover, the peninsula geographically occupies a central rather than marginal place in the European continent, as it is located between different Europes (the Catholic, the Protestant, the Orthodox and the Islamic) and on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Neither do the Balkans understand how it has been possible that the name of the famous *Monte Haemus*, so often mentioned in Greek classical verse, Byzantine, Latin and also modern texts, suddenly in the 20th-century was substituted by the Turkish word *Balkan*, which is not even a place name, but rather a generic noun which simply means "mount". The Greek name *Monte Haemus* or the Slavic *Stara Planina* (the Old Mountain), in use for millennia, in the 19th-century was substituted by the incomplete name which not even Ottomans used to designate the peninsula in question.

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The representation of the Balkans as a boiling pot of ethnic and sexual violence had a clear function within the pre-war context of the early 20th-century. The obscure image of the Balkans provided support and a raison d'être to the luminous image of Western Europe which defined itself, in a binary discursive construction, through opposition. The positive image that it built of itself needed the negative image to show what it was not (or should not have been). Thus, the stigmatisation of the Balkans appears as the main tool used by the progress-loving Europe in the event of self-essentialisation. In this process, according to the provocative Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek, Balkan people are used by some Europeans to project on them (the other, the mysterious cat people) their fears and prohibited dreams.

However, it is worth saying that the western vision of the Balkans has not always

been negative. There are many examples of idealised representation of the peninsula in which not only did western travellers find strange atavistic habits but also the longed for connection with real life in scission in the western part of Europe. Aimed towards progress and its new laws – to rationalise, individualise, produce and accumulate material goods –, the Occident had sacrificed many values which in other times were the main motors of its society. In contrast, the virgin land of the Balkans ("blood and honey") appeared as a place where antinomies still coexisted and feelings could be expressed freely, without the interposition of the restrictive rules of abstract reason. For western Europeans, making a trip to the Balkans meant returning to the pre-modern Europe, the Europe of lost values: honour, heroism and integrity. From this perspective, the Balkan is usually linked to the idea of the youth of humanity, full of energy and good health. The positive western vision of the Balkans is nourished by the romantic yearning for a life full of meaning, poetry and adventure. Anglo-Saxon writers such as Herbert Vivian advocated the lost values still preserved in Balkan culture and society: "Undoubtedly, our world will be proud of the uniformity of its civilisation, but the traveller will no longer have the opportunity to live a romantic adventure."

Romania (Maria-Àngels Roque).

A kind of "culture of well-being" is one of the main characteristics of the Balkan modus vivendi, which avoids obeying the rules of an excessively ordered and civilised world. It is the common denominator of different peoples and ethnic groups who inhabit this region, which gives them a collective identity despite their religious and cultural differences while distinguishing them from the West in which, despite the economic prosperity, life sometimes seems tasteless. Seen from the Balkans, the West is like an admired, rich and ordered world, although hyper-productive to the point of being capable of offering goods such as decaffeinated coffee, skimmed milk or non-alcoholic beer – things deprived of their own existence – thereby obeying the imperative of living rationally.

Balkanism and Orientalism

Undoubtedly, the creation of the Balkanist discourse (Balkanism) is closely linked to the existence of Orientalism, the general discourse on the Orient. It is the same narratological mechanism, with a similar imaginary and vocabulary. At the mention of the word Islam, our mind reacts producing threatening images of Khomeini, Gaddafi, Saddam Hussein, Bin Laden, the 11S, the 11M, the Jihad, slavery, discrimination of women, violence or the perfidious licence to kill. We baulk at the idea of travelling or doing business in the Balkans because of the phantom of insecurity, violence, lack of legal transparency, corruption and barbarism. In both cases, our knowledge is subordinated to a series of stereotyped images which arouse fear. However, those who had the chance of getting to know those countries, including writers, travellers and contemporary journalists and politicians, show indignation at such stigmatisation. How and why has the negative image of some geographical regions, such as the Middle East, Central Asia or the Balkans, been created?

Western thought and art started to create images of the other from the late 17th-century, in the midst of the colonial era. The Orient as a semi-mythical place, endowed with both romantic and diabolic elements, was invented and reinvented from the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in the late 18th-century. Meanwhile, the image of the Balkans as the exotic and mysterious "European Orient" started taking shape through the writings of Lord Byron to finally establish itself as a political discourse with negative connotations in the years prior to the First World War.

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The representations of the other in European art and science have emerged and developed as a result of enlightened intellectual tradition. The knowledge of ethnic peoples and groups of the so-called Second and Third World, instead of being based on their ontology (real being), usually revolves around the idea of their poor civilising development and the inferiority of their culture. As contemporary scholars point out, knowledge, the reflection of the Euro-centrism which has marked the era of modernity, has been shaped as a discourse not lacking scientific ambition. Since the recognition of the epistemological

crisis in modern European western science, the studies began of the aforementioned discourses on the other (African, Latin American, Asian, Muslim, Balkan and Eastern European otherness). Their development took place in the best university centres in Europe and the United States and embraced such varied disciplines as literature, theory of culture, sociology, history and philosophy. In this field, called "post-colonialism", the work *Orientalism* (1978) by the American professor of Palestinian origin Edward Said dealing with the discourse on eastern otherness is considered pioneering.

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Contrary to what might be thought, Orientalism is not a collection of writings by European travellers on Egypt and other Arab countries, with their accounts of archaeological exploration, adorned with images of snake charmers and odalisques. According to Said's definition, Orientalism is "a systematic discourse by which Europe was able to manage – even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period." It is not a discipline or subject, or the result of a conspiracy. Orientalism is a discourse or, as the author himself points out, "is rather a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts" added to a set of dreams, images and vocabularies which are at the disposal of anyone wishing to talk about what is found to the east of a geographical demarcation line as arbitrary as it is impassable, which imaginarily divides the world between two main blocs, the Orient and the West, "them" (the others) and "us". Said explained that he had not managed to discover any period in European or North American history, from the Middle Ages to the present, in which Islam was approached or discussed outside a structure based on passion, prejudice and political interest.

The study of the discourse on the Orient follows a theoretical basis according to which literature and culture are not politically and historically "innocent", so that society and culture should be analysed jointly in order to be better understood. In Said's view, there are no innocent ideas on the Orient but just a network of interests which inevitably is applied every time the issue of eastern identity emerges. The imperialist discourse, whose result is European citizens *confronted* with the East, conditions the knowledge that we could have of the area. Thus, since Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1799 until the American imperial advance, the stereotype of the Arabs has inundated television, cinema, newspapers and magazines. Therefore, Orientalism, Said affirms, represents a kind of network in which there is "a dynamic exchange between individual authors and the large political concerns shaped by the three great empires – British, French, American – in whose intellectual and imaginative territory the writing was produced." Any discourse on the other is characterised by a complex structure based on the weaving of narrative and symbolic elements, and can be analysed from the historical, anthropological, sociological and narratological point of view.

The study of the literary origins of the discourse on the Balkans (Balkanism) shows

that this rests on a transcultural myth which emerged in Victorian England, that of Count Dracula. The Balkans have been represented in the world in the light of stories of vampires, lycanthropes and princesses bathing in the blood of maidens to achieve eternal youth. Along with the constant influence of these images used in the entertainment industry, the vision of the Balkans has been shaped through an extremely powerful media machinery which reproduced almost without variations a frozen image of the Balkans, constructed in the anteroom of the First World War. In the 1990s, the existence of this particular discourse became evident, as the commentary on the Yugoslavian Wars (the so-called "Balkan Wars" although they took place in the territory of a single Balkan country) made use of the same metaphors, images and vocabulary as that which had been shaped in the period of the European colonial crisis which led to the Great War.

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How are the Balkan others usually represented? As figures of the European periphery who, with their primitivism and innate violence, threaten to make the civilised Europe into a "powder keg" after having infected it with the virus of "Balkanisation". According to this vision, present both in fiction and in the media, the Europeans of the Balkan Peninsula *are not like "normal" Europeans*: behind their acceptable image (an attractive physical appearance: white and blond, often with aristocratic airs) their animal nature (wild impulses, innate violence) is hidden. Many cinema and literary works of the horror genre emphasise that the origin of characters such as cat women, werewolves or vampires is Balkan (Romania, Hungary, Serbia).

Although historians are aware that the peninsula has been the setting of dramatic changes in 20th-century European history, the knowledge of the Balkans as a geographical and cultural entity with its immanent multiculturality is in the shadow of the aforementioned discourse of great symbolic power comfortably located beyond historical time. According to this, the Balkan peoples, like those from the East, are underdeveloped, uncivilised and destined to fight against each other eternally, and lack the capacity to maintain peace and construct a society of prosperity and development. Therefore, external – military, political and economic – intervention becomes necessary.

Past and Present of Balkan Islam

The military interventionism in the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and the Balkans has not brought improvement in intercultural relations or political stability. The process of economic globalisation has even led to a military globalisation whose victims are, in most cases, the Muslim peoples. Simultaneously, we observe the appearance of new social phenomena such as the radicalisation of Islam and the growing Westernism (discourse on the West as an enemy) both among Muslim societies from other continents and among European Muslims.

In the case of the Western Balkans, after an era based on cultural pluralism within the Yugoslavian state, the society took an unexpected step backwards during the 1990s.

In the new context after the collapse of communism, the option taken was the creation of nation-states in Eastern Europe, a process that fostered the emergence of nationalisms, cultural differences and fights for territory. In the last two decades, some Balkan peoples and ethnic groups passed from the status of non-sovereign minorities (which they had in the framework of the Yugoslavian federal state) to self-affirmation as autonomous political actors and even the creation of independent states. The separatist tendencies and the lack of transparency of international politics opened the door to the abuses of cultural pluralism, as well as a regressive social transformation and the transformation of Balkan Islam. It is enough to compare the past and present of Muslims in the peninsula to see how intercultural relations have degenerated and the radicalisation of Islam has increased.

The importance of the Ottoman Empire in the shaping of Islam in the Balkans is undeniable. However, it would be a mistake to regard Balkan Islam as Turkish or Ottoman

The Muslim communities in the Balkans are known for a very particular Islam which contrasts with the image commonly held of those who profess this religion from North Africa and the Middle East. One of the most remarkable characteristics of Balkan Muslims is their diversity, linguistic (Albanese, Slav and Turkish-speaking), national and ethnic (Albanese, Bosniacs, Turks and Serbians). Islam extended through the Balkans for five centuries of Ottoman rule in south-east Europe (from the 14th to the early 20th centuries). Consequently, all the states that make up the political map of the Balkan Peninsula (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Greece, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo although Romania and even Slovenia could be included) have an important Muslim component among their population. The greatest Muslim ethnic group in the Balkans are the Albanese, who amount to five million people. It is not a population ethnically or linguistically different from the Christian populations living in that area. Three and a half million Slavs are Muslim, descendants of those Slavs who for convenience embraced Islam in the era of the Ottoman Empire. They are the inhabitants of Bosnia and Herzegovina (where they are known as *bošnjaks* or *Bosniacs*), of the Serbian region of Sandzak (*gorani*), Macedonia (*torbeši*) and Bulgaria (*pomaks*); small pockets of Slavic Muslims are also found in northern Greece and Kosovo (*gorani*). In the past, Turks constituted an important part of the population of Macedonia, Thessalia, Morea and Bulgaria. At present, one million Turks live in Bulgaria, while in Macedonia and Greece there are around 200,000, and in the urban centres of Kosovo and Sandzak even fewer.

The importance of the Ottoman Empire in the shaping of Islam in the Balkans is undeniable. However, it would be a mistake to regard Balkan Islam as Turkish or Ottoman. On the contrary, the diversity of traditions and the introduction of particular elements are its main characteristics. Balkan Muslims are mainly Sunnis of Hannafite rite, but there is also a Bektashi Shiite minority. The population living in poorer more backward rural areas practises a more traditional Islam, while the Muslim population in the cities is far more secularised. Although traditionally Bosnian Islam has been open and tolerant,

there have also been tougher, violent and excluding currents which on diverse historical occasions managed to exploit the opportunity to accomplish their political objectives. For instance, between the two world wars, radical ideas were introduced by the Bosnian religious elites who had studied in the Egyptian university Al-Azhara. Those elites founded the Young Muslim Organisation (1939) of an ideology close to that of the Muslim Brothers. After the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, in general, the Muslims in the Balkans were open to the influences of the Arab world. During the communist era, between 1945 and 1990, they were condemned to isolation, with the exception of the Yugoslavian Muslims, who in the 1960s developed important links with the Islamist centres. The contacts established in that time between the pan-Islamist Bosnian activists and the Islamists of the Arab countries played a key role in the foundation of the Party of Democratic Action (SDA, 1990) which stood in the first free elections of the former Yugoslavia. Among the most active pan-Islamists was the future president of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Alija Izetbegovic.

The radicalisation of Muslims in Europe is today a challenge that both the EU and the Balkan candidate countries have to face. In the last decades, Balkan Muslims passed from the status of non-sovereign ethnic minorities (in the framework of the Yugoslavian state) to self-affirmation as autonomous political actors. In the first free Yugoslavian elections held in the early 1990s, political parties which represented the Muslim population (the aforementioned SDA in Bosnia) were formed and a "nationalisation" of Islam and the religious institutions took place. This political and religious awakening of Balkan Muslims led to the creation of unusual national communities and even independent states. Before 1991, the only country with a Muslim majority was Albania, while with the disintegration of Yugoslavia two more states of Muslim majority have appeared: the so-called Bosnian-Croatian Federation, one of the two entities that make up Bosnia and Herzegovina, where approximately 75% of the population is Muslim, and Kosovo, with more than 85%. Most of them are Muslims of the Sunni current linked to the Hanafi Madhhab law school. Some belong, however, to the Sufi order established in Albania and Kosovo – Bektashis – or Alevism or Alawism, an Islamic current present in the rural areas of Anatolia and the Balkans, linked to the Bektashis.

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Although most of them do not accept the radical interpretations of Islam and define themselves as a plural and tolerant community, it is also true that in recent years we have observed a special emphasis on religious identity and the presence of ideologies of Salafism and Wahabism (in Europe these ideologies promote groups such as al-Qaeda, the Islamic Moroccan Combat Group or the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria). The war context of the last decade of the 20th-century has eased the entrance of Mujahideen and different Muslim NGOs linked to the Arab-Afghan network. Both the army and the education system in Bosnia were used as agents of re-Islamisation. However, it is worth emphasising that today these phenomena provoke the rejection of most of the Muslim population in Bosnia.

Among the major promoters of Islamic proselytism, the state actors linked to oil monarchies (such as the universities of the Persian Gulf States or the Saudi Arabia committees) and the non-state actors related to the Arab-Afghan network stand out. In Bosnia, for instance, in the two last decades hundreds of mosques and madrasas have been built funded by the Persian Gulf countries through Islamic institutions in the Balkans. Notable among the non-state actors are the members of al-Qaeda: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sandzak and Albania have served as a hiding place for members of al-Qaeda or of the Mujahideen who are pursued in their countries of origin. In 1996, after the signing of the Dayton Agreements, the Mujahideen founded the Active Islamic Youth (AIO) in Bosnia, Kosovo and Sandzak. Scholars warn that this organisation is the most radical in the Balkans and can have a role similar to that of Hizb-ul-Tahrir in Western Europe.

The radicalisation of Islam at a global level is not only the consequence of non-Muslim nationalisms, the wars in Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan and so on or the stigmatisation of the Islamic world. It could be the response of specific segments of the Muslim world to the challenges of modernisation and, especially, the separation between state and religion. In the current context of social and technological acceleration, western societies also experience major changes and tensions. Radicalisation often emerges as a response to the crisis of sovereignty, a concept in the midst of being reformulated in the field of law and politics. Meanwhile, in the cultural field, standardising modernity has resulted in the reconstruction of particular identities in an attempt to resist globalising homogenisation. The tension between different singularities increases in particular within multicultural political groups (states and federations) in which the political, economic and social framework was reapproached to the benefit of fractionalised policies.

Conclusion

Having reviewed the factors that determined the (sometimes antagonistic) identity construction processes in the Balkans, we can argue that multiculturality in itself is not a source of problems, that a pluricultural common identity is possible, and that peaceful coexistence is a logical consequence of an active participatory society. The Balkan past shows that the area called "the munitions dump of Europe" is actually an example of both good and bad management of pluriculturalism and reveals the scarce attention given to two central issues: a) the narrow link between the quality of the local management of diversity and the global geopolitical context, and b) the strengths of a shared pluricultural identity of Balkan citizens.

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Different political and economic interests have come together in this bordering territory, which has historically acted as a bridge between the East and the West and as a strategic region for the Ottoman and the Austro-Hungarian empires, NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The Balkan past shows that, in times of uncertainty and reformulation of political borders as at the end of the First World War or the Cold War, ethnic identities were easy to invoke

as an alternative to the ideologies providing political, economic and social frameworks. In contexts of withdrawal of human rights, the citizen's wellbeing and weakening of the states, the political vacuum was filled with national identity policies. However, invoking nationalism in pluricultural societies meant igniting the munitions dump.

The Balkan countries that accommodate different languages, traditions and worldviews are also an example of peaceful coexistence that has lasted hundreds and thousands of years, although their good pluriculturalism management practices and the inclusion of minorities are a great unknown. Along with the recent secessionist dynamics, some areas of the Balkans are home to a large number of peoples that preserve the community spirit (for instance, in Vojvodina, the region located in the north of Serbia, twenty-eight nationalities live peacefully together and have television programmes and publications in their respective languages, including Romany).

In times of healthy inclusive policies, cross-cutting divisions were cultivated in the Balkans that brought together people of different languages, cultures and religions under the same umbrella of education, work, sports or leisure. Together they participated in civic activities, arts and sports. In participatory spaces, people got involved according to their professional or particular interest, regardless of their ethnicity or religious belief. Cross-cutting identities were reinforced, maintaining social cohesion in an inclusive society that recognised human rights, the right to work and housing for all citizens on an equal basis. Cultural differences were perceived as a source of richness rather than as a threat.

The Balkans are a living example of how local and international policies can foster, or destroy, peaceful coexistence. The key to good local management of interculturality lies in the recognition of the human rights of all the peoples, nations and ethnic groups that live there, but also in the affirmation of their social, economic and other obligations. Equal rights and duties must be guaranteed to all minorities. The Balkan experience shows that when double standard policies are applied that benefit some peoples or ethnic groups over others, or international interventions based on short-term solutions such as the Dayton Accords or the Ohrid Framework Agreement, all that is achieved is planting the seeds of future instability.

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Finally, in the current context of European enlargement towards the East, refugee movements and labour migration, the European Union forms a space of multiculturality and democratic pluralism. In the face of sudden economic imbalances that threaten to undermine its social structure and awaken intolerance, it is increasingly necessary to invest in its own and effective political mechanisms to safeguard social cohesion in Europe. The history and cultural diversity of the Balkans offer valuable lessons on the management of multiculturality and peaceful coexistence. They illuminate the advantages and opportunities that emanate from multicultural policies supported by a common identity with an impact on sustainable social and economic development, based on exchange of resources, technology and knowledge with neighbouring countries of the Global South.

Tourists in Sarajevo (Jim Marshall).