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International Affairs

## The Outsider Within

# The Impact of Western Bias on International Intervention in the Yugoslav Conflicts of the 1990s.

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### Introduction

The Balkan Peninsula, a geopolitical and cultural region in southeastern Europe continues to be an area of interest for academics across an array of disciplines. The Balkans are often described as a region that is plagued with violence; whose inhabitants retain generational grievances rooting in ethnic hatred for one another, and whose 'backwardness' inhibits them from fully integrating with the Western, civilized world (Bakic-Hayden, 1995: 919). For the purposes of this paper, and what is most frequently alluded to in the literature, the 'Balkans' is the term of preference to refer to the collection of states that once formed the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The Balkans maintain a 'dual nature' as they are considered to be simultaneously 'European' and 'non-European' (Voskopoulous, 2002: 35). The ambiguous distinction of the Balkans is driven by the West's attempt to define itself in comparison to its conceptual 'other'. The West in this context refers to the European Community, comprised of mainly western and central European states, and the United States.

Relying on the tropes tied to the region's collective 'national identity' which relies more on ethnic criteria, the West forms a dichotomous analysis to base its superiority on. The West maintains this antagonistic view of the Balkans through contrasting specific traits associated with both Blocs to assert dominance over the region. In this paper, I will argue that the inadequate response and latent action by the international community in addressing the violent conflict in the Former Yugoslavia in the 1990s was the result of ill-informed Western Bias towards the Balkans that led them to misinterpret the root cause of the initial conflict, which ultimately intensified the conflict. Orientalist rhetoric rooted in national stereotypes fuelled the image of the Balkans as the 'European-other', thus leading the West to perceive all actions within that particular region to be connected to ethnic attributes which the West believes informs 'Balkan' nationalisms.

### Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this theoretical framework is to identify the factors that inform the

Western bias towards the Balkan region. To do so, a causal relationship can be drawn between attributes of national membership as the foundations to nationalism, which then inform the Orientalist rhetoric maintained by the West, to intensify the East/West Dichotomy which asserts a power relationship between the West and the East.

### **Nationalism**

Using Benedict Anderson's definition of a nation as an 'imagined community, we can locate the specific attributes that form the stereotypes of the Balkans that are recited in Western discourse. The imaginative component of the nation refers to the inability of a community to know each person within the community; thus, they imagine their relation and closeness through associating specific attributes with membership (Anderson, 1999:6). For the Balkans states, the reliance on factors to determine group membership such as common history, language, and religion give it a label of being a culturally defined community, versus that of a politically defined community. Religion is the defining attribute of community membership among the Yugoslav republics, and a common history associated with each religion creates the foundation for each nation's respective nationalist discourse.

Preceding the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, declarations of independence from Slovenia and Croatia in 1991 were met with acceptance by the international community because of the parallel attributes of those republics with the West. From a historical perspective, the northern republics

fell under Hapsburg rule, therefore ascribing to the protestant-catholic faith and using the Roman alphabet; whereas the southern Republics were under Ottoman rule, adhering mostly to Islam due to the societal hierarchical system which profited certain religions over others (Bakic-Hayden, 1995: 924). Serbia is a *sui generis* case—often relying on attributes to define its unique difference in the region such as their orthodox faith, their antiquated minority status under Ottoman rule, and the use of the Cyrillic alphabet (Bakic-Hayden, 1995:295).

Maria Todorova's ground-breaking conception of 'Balkanization' which has come to signify "the general disintegration of viable nation-states and the reversion to 'the tribal, the backward, the primitive, and the barbarian'" (Hetemi, 2016:318) can aid in the understanding of how the national identity of the Balkan states assumes a negative sentiment. The trend that emerged following the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the age of independence movements, was rhetorically premised upon historical myths to reignite the desire for self-determination of these nations. Such a trend, "prompted by political propaganda and nationalist ideologies, used history to support their territorial claims, defend ethnic cleansing, and justify conflicts with other countries" (Hetemi, 2016:319). Since Serbian nationalism is "modelled in the struggle against the Ottoman Turks and in the expansion of the Serbian state"(Gagnon, 1995:141), it alludes to a desire to return to a culture that is pre-civilized, with corresponding concepts of barbarism, backwardness, and violence. Slovenia and Croatia's political elites

mobilized similar discourses to illustrate the northern republics' similarities to Western Europe to promote the likelihood of a universally recognized independence and integration into the West, while simultaneously relying on stereotypes to associate Serbia with non-European values (Bakic-Hayden, 1995:924).

In popular discourse, the Balkans are often associated with negative stereotypes as a result of mostly being covered during times of regional turmoil, such as the Balkan Wars 1912-13, the role of the Balkans in World War I, Croatian fascism, and the genocide against Serbs during World War II, and the ethnic cleansings during the Yugoslav conflicts of the 1990s. These images and the nationalist narratives become the only real aspects of association of the international community with the Balkans; and due to the reductionist analyses of Balkan conflicts, academic scholarship and popular media are not concerned with an alternate view of the area. Therefore, results in the continued propelling of misinformed stereotypes which continues to inform the Western bias. These stereotypes now being tied to a particular territory and temporality, inform the discourses of orientalism.

### **Discourses of 'Othering'**

Ambiguity is best to describe the location of the Balkans in a geopolitical, cultural sense concerning the rest of Europe (Todorova, 1997:17). It is this ambiguous nature of Balkan typology that allows for the application of an Orientalist framework to begin to explain Western biases towards the Balkans. Orientalism, coined by Edward

Said, is a multifaceted concept that, in its most simplistic understanding, is a framework to analyse the "Orient, its people, 'mind', [and] destiny" that is "based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (Said, 1978:1-3). The Orient assumes the role of the "other" which "has helped to define Europe (or the West)" (Said, 1978:1). The relationship between the Occident and Orient is one of power, domination, and complex hegemony (Said, 1978:5). In its earliest conception, literature and academics played a pivotal role in the conception of the Orient as it was through their writings the images and understandings of Oriental culture were made immemorial in the West. The connection between nationalism and orientalism is that the attributes that determine group membership and decipher certain nationalisms from one another, inform the West's perception of the Orient. This perception is then written about in the orientalist literature and studies; thus, propelling a misinformed perception of a foreign culture, whose immediate relationship is exploitative. This is evident in the rhetorical use of stereotypes and demonizing vocabulary used by Robert Kaplan's Balkan historiography titled 'Balkan Ghosts', where he suggests that Nazism is rooted in Balkan origins (Voskopoulous, 2002: 34).

To maintain the balance of power in favour of the West, orientalism must reinforce the inferior position of the Orient to the West by differentiating their national conceptions; one adhering to a more developed and Enlightened societal formation, and one stuck in primitivism, a prelude to Western

enlightened society. The West's representation of the Orient enables them to "legitimize their domination over those subjugated and conquered", a relationship that "a powerful cultural hegemony is still at work [as] discursive hardening permits potentially stronger groups to define weaker groups" (Buchowski, 2006:463).

Despite having its theoretical roots grounded in colonialism, the language of Orientalism as a "rhetorical structure with a political and economic relationship of dominance and submission" ...retains its force in non-colonial settings" despite the disappearance of the institutions of colonialism (Flemming, 2000:1223-4). This appears in the form of "nesting orientalism's", which is a "pattern of reproduction of the original dichotomy upon which Orientalism is premised...[where] this gradation is reproduced with the Balkans perceived as most 'eastern'" from the western European perspective; and where the same dichotomous relationship nests itself within intra-Balkan relations (Bakic-Hayden, 1995:918). The inter-Balkan relations highlight a more explicit dichotomy as the northern regions of Slovenia and Croatia appropriate the historical circumstances of being under Hapsburg rule as the product of their superior qualities when contrasted with the southern regions who share an ambiguous identity due to the "cultural discontinuation created by the Ottoman conquest" (Bakic-Hayden, 1995:925). Crediting a "negative connotation to terms like 'Orthodoxy' and 'Byzantine'" which is then reified through nationalist rhetoric to promote the superiority of the North over Southern

republics parallels the orientalist concept of 'unchanging truths'; thus, creating a "symbolic association of a group or a region with a negative feature of social or cultural life [that] instigates terminological alienation" (Bakic-Hayden, 1995:926).

The role of media in neo-orientalism manifestations is crucial as they assume the role of a collaborator of Western dominance unto the East through the standardized use of Balkan stereotypes. The overused slogan of the 'ancient hatred' of the south Slavic peoples to define the root causes of conflict in the Balkans creates a "rhetorical screen obscuring the modernity of conflict based on [political categories] by invoking one of the lowest aspects of their historical association" and overlooking "the significance of their other interactions and integrations"(Bakic-Hayden, 1995:930). Reducing the root cause of conflict in the Balkans to a small aspect of nationalist myth and promoting that narrative as an 'unchanging truth' through mediums of discourse, renders in perpetuity the Balkan conflict and the Balkans in general as tied to the stereotypes perpetuated by the West.

### **The 'West' versus the 'Rest'**

The amalgamation of nationalism and orientalism draws a parallel to Hans Kohn's thesis concerning the defining attributes of good and bad nationalisms and the implications of such normative titles when they become attached to a specific temporal reality (Coakley, 2017:268). In sum, Kohn asserts that there are two ways in which communities form their nationalisms; one informed by political and economic changes

accompanied by a shift in group consciousness which is considered 'civic' nationalism; while the other finds expression in cultural attributes such as a common history evident in literature and folklore, language, and religion as a cultural indicator, which is defined as 'ethnic' nationalism (Kohn, 1944:4). Civic nationalism is associated with traits present in the 'West', and ethnic nationalism is argued to be associated with traits present in the 'East'. Since the West maintains a cultural hegemony over most of the non-Western world, they in essence dictate what forms of nationalism are good and what are bad. In perceiving themselves as having civic nationalism, they will juxtapose specific attributes of community membership to that of a society that is deemed to be defined by ethnic terms. If the West is premised off rationalism, then the East roots its identity in romanticism; if the West is cognitively enlightened and developed then the east by comparison is primitive and backward (Coakley, 2017: 255). Viewing the ethnic community as the prelude to civic nationalism reinforces the rhetoric used to describe ethnic nationalism as something that can be overcome to reach the preferred congregate of community. In typical in-and-out-group psychology, the West will perceive its nationalism to be superior to others and will thus justify this rationale in any means possible. Infiltrating the realm of academics, literature, and foreign policy; the east/west dichotomy creates a "cultural map that divides Europe into two spaces incompatible by virtue of their historical experience: one space is 'modern, 'civilized', Western Christian; the other is

'anti-modern', 'uncivilized', 'Eastern Christian' (Voskopoulous, 2002: 35).

Membership into the West is ultimately contingent upon the political and economic contributions of nations to Western hegemony. For the Balkan states, that possibility remains low. With no natural resources to contribute and an unstable economy from its communist past, the former Yugoslav states were of no use to the West following the collapse of communism. When violence emerged following the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, the West and its institutions opted for a policy of non-involvement premised on two main factors. First, that the west maintained an inherent bias, informed by orientalist discourse which led them to completely misinterpret the root causes for this surge in violence and thus commence a series of actions that worsened the conditions in the Balkans. Second, due to the necessity to maintain Western superiority over the rest of the world, the cost-benefit analysis of sending aid into the Balkans did not suffice the domestic interests of key western actors, thus resulting in inefficient intervention.

### **International Perception and Response to Conflicts in Croatia**

#### **From Communism to a 'New World Order'**

The West assigns itself to be an international hegemonic power in terms of ideas and societal development, and therefore determine, through policy and foreign affairs, the interaction and usefulness of the rest of the world to contribute to that power.

The boundaries of 'civilization' in the East, therefore, shift dependent on the motives of the West, and whether the East can serve as a benefit to them (Flemming, 2000:1228). The collapse of authoritarian communism in 1989 marked a transformative period of the collective identities and meaning of the Balkans as a Western parallel to an insignificant 'other' (Buchowski, 2006: 464). Membership into the ideological "West" was contingent upon "the degree to which various countries, authorities, social groups, and individuals have embraced the [hegemonic liberal ideology of] free market and democracy", which became a mechanism to categorize the "us" and the "them" (Buchowski, 2006: 464-5). This idea is what underlined the relationship between the United States and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia at the height of the cold war. The U.S.-Yugoslav relationship at the height of the cold war was predicated on the belief that the U.S. could influence and promote the separation of USSR satellite states by providing economic and military incentives to states that portrayed some rejection of Soviet ideology—such as Yugoslavia in their independent stance to adhere to the Soviet Com-inform (Zarev, 2018:4). It was also centred upon the US strategy to contain the spread of communism to the Eastern bloc, with the Balkans being situated between the borders of Western Europe and the Soviet Union.

The fall of the eastern bloc in 1989 ushered in a new conception of the 'East' and therefore the European '*Other*'. Membership into the Western camp remained on the degree to which states adopted neo-liberal policy prescriptions. Yet, this measurement

inherently holds Eastern and Central Europe to a disadvantage due to the weak economic institutions that remained following their belonging to the Soviet Union. Weak political institutions, a declining economy, and a fragmented societal makeup following the attempted ethnic reconstruction under Tito's regime and the preconditions of Yugoslavia following the democratization age ultimately set the country up for failure when they attempted to hold its first democratic elections (Woodward, 1995:8). The disappearing necessity to maintain a strategic relationship with Yugoslavia based on their geopolitical locale during the height of the cold war, amalgamated with the inability to completely apply neo-liberal democratic prescriptions onto Yugoslav domestic policy is what shifted the view of Yugoslavia as a Western ally to the European 'other'.

### **Croatia's Place in the European East/West Dichotomy**

The positioning of the northern republics, such as Croatia and Slovenia, plays a key role in the typology of east/west distinctions within the former Yugoslavia, and the larger scope of West-European relations. Seeking independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, Croatia relied on the utilization of rhetoric that would promote their image as being pro-western and European, and further, the use of discriminatory, nationalist informed rhetoric and propaganda to distance themselves from 'Orientalist' or 'Balkanism' rhetoric and association, as those conceptions are prone to the non-European, 'other' label (Hetemi, 2016: 321). Drawing upon antiquated associations of

Europeanness, such as Croatia harbouring on being historically part of the Habsburg Empire thus European by association, in addition to paralleling Western society in terms of the dominant religion, culture, and language association, was seen to be a strategy for the northern republics to gain acceptance into the West. This approach was strengthened by the deployment of discursive rhetoric, such as 'Byzantine' or 'Ottoman', which aimed to further diverge connections with other Balkan states, such as Serbia (Roberts, 1996:364). Croatia's "supposed and self-proclaimed solidly pro-European and pro-western state" (Bakic-Hayden, 1995:930), was perceived to give them an advantage when it came to the international recognition of Croatian sovereignty following secession from the Former Yugoslavia.

### **Response to Croatia's Declaration of Independence**

#### *The U.S. on Croatian Independence*

The U.S. was first reluctant to acknowledge the sovereignty of an independent Croatia as the foreign policy that predated 1991, heavily influenced by cold-war relations with Yugoslavia, perceived a unified Yugoslavia would better fair US interests (Woodward, 1995:7). In addition, with the U.S.'s involvement in the Gulf War, and the experiences of the second world war still looming, the U.S., as proclaimed by President George Bush at the Moscow summit in 1991, "Americans will not support those who seek independence in order to replace a far-off tyranny with a local despotism", nor will they "aid those to

promote a suicidal nationalism based upon ethnic hatred" (Lukic & Lynch, 1996:266). However, the U.S. later acknowledged the independence of Croatia and three other Republics in April 1992, following Belgium and Germany's insistence on acknowledgement, and subsequent pressures from the European Community to avoid inciting any divisions within the EC because of inter-alliance tensions (Lukic & Lynch, 1996:270).

#### *Western Europe on Croatian Independence*

The ramifications of international recognition of Croatian independence were ultimately the commencement of the Yugoslav conflicts. Within Croatian borders resided ethnic Serbians and other ethnic minorities. The significance of the Serb population finds its origins in the near-distant history of Serb persecution at the hands of the Croatian fascists during World War Two. Upon recognizing Croatian sovereignty, the "UN and EU failed to adequately address the main issue underlying the conflict: who would control primarily Serb-populated areas of Croatia?" (Pushkina, 2004:403). Ultimately, it was the "persuasiveness of anti-Serb information and propaganda, and German insistence [that] drove Western support for the self-determination of...Croats" (Jacobsen, 1996:332). The ultimate error was thus the recognition of the "right to independence of one nation within Croat and Bosnian borders with no account of the presence also of others" (Jacobsen, 1996:347)

### **Western Perception of the Conflict in Croatia**

Bakic-Hayden's 'nesting orientalism' is an adequate way of explaining the path to the West's perception of the conflicts in Croatia, and a wider extent, in 1990s Yugoslavia. The reproduction of orientalist dichotomy within states, among former Yugoslav republics, and between Yugoslavia and Western Europe, the micro-level aggressions and use of discriminatory rhetoric and nationalist propaganda animate the image of the Balkan nations to the West; thus, informing their perception of the nature of the conflict. These nationalist ideologies "framed by rhetoric derived from religion and culture result in war...in a region...already labelled as "violent" ..." determines the understanding of the nature of civilization "to the east of western Europe" (Bakic-Haden, 1995:929). From which adopted impression is one informed from literary and aural media sources, "high-ranking military and government officials...that the former Yugoslavia is an area where hundreds of years of deep hatred erupted again in bloodshed and murder" (Roberts, 1996:363). The perception that any conflict in the region is nothing more than an innate disposition of 'these people' dismisses the urgency in addressing internal issues which were at play such as the violation of human rights, minority rights, self-determination, territorial integrity, and transnational justice.

In addition, the surface-level and reductionist understanding of Balkan geopolitics and history; evident in the U.S. typology of Yugoslav conflict under the larger umbrella of "the Balkan war" which

produced a skewed image of the identities of other non-Yugoslav, Balkan states (Todorova, 1997: 186), is the cause for the initial misinterpretation of the Yugoslav conflicts, and for whom the West's misappropriated actions led to greater conflict in the region. The view maintained by the U.S. in alignment with their non-intervention policy asserted that the conflict in Croatia was an "internal civil war, not a 'cross border operation' or a 'threat to international order'" (Lukic & Lynch, 1996:268), conflicted with the views of some EC member states, which ultimately drove the direction and degree of efficiency of the international peacekeeping mission mandated by the United Nations.

A large portion of Western intervention was done with the mandate of punishing Serbians for perpetuating the atrocities conducted through the 1990s. Much of the rhetoric present in the media, political circles, and policy prescriptions was heavily informed by anti-Serb sentiments. Also, when discussing the imaginings of Yugoslavia, the descriptions of national identities of the neighbouring republics often are reduced to attributes of Serbian history; thus, projecting an overall negative image on the Balkans through an eradication of Balkan history (Todorova, 1997:186). This is evident in the recitation of the Battle of Kosovo 1389 as the catalyst for violence in the region, which is subjective to Serbian historiography.

The West's adherence to the view of the Yugoslav conflicts as a "civil war based on the revival of ethnic conflict after the fall of communism" and the necessity to unleash

their repressed ethnic identities and freedoms which advocated a return to their "national histories of the pre-communist era" is the foundational belief that informed the Western bias in its intervention policy in the former Yugoslavia (Woodward, 1995:8). The attachment of historical attributes to the national identity of the Yugoslav republics produces allusions to a pre-communist, pre-civilized point in time. This view parallels the West's view of the orient, thus producing a subconscious association of the Balkans with that of the Orient.

### Conclusion

The underlying rationale that drove the mandate of international aid organizations such as the UN and NATO, in its policies of intervention in the Yugoslav conflicts beginning with the conflicts in Croatia, was inefficient and intensified further conflict in the region. From the start, the West misunderstood the causes of conflict between the former Yugoslav states. Generalizing the histories and identities of each Balkan state, the reductionist view of the Balkans as being a region destined to violence, and its people with the innate

disposition to engage in ethnic conflict rooted in 'ancient hatreds' led the West to believe that the conflict that emerged following the dissolution of the Former Yugoslavia was nothing more than a civil war. In addition, the lack of positive Western involvement in the Balkans historically in terms of allowing economic participation with the rest of the EC, and the lack of natural resources and a stable economy rendered the usefulness of the Balkans to the West as non-existent—further solidifying the West's policy of non-involvement, and lack of urgency to contribute monetarily to the international organizations it was supposed to lead. While the Balkans geographically are considered to reside in Europe, its cultural distinction as being associated with the East subjects it to an inferior power-relationship with the West. The impact of nationalism on orientalist rhetoric informed the internal perception of the conflicts in the Balkans as something innate and common in this region, therefore leading the West to prescribe policies per this reductionist view—ultimately rendering them unsuccessful in treating and containing the Yugoslav conflict.

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