THE BALKAN WALL

Maria N. Todorova: *Imagining the Balkans*


It was November 8, 1989. The Yugoslavia[-case] did not yet exist in the world's consciousness. The East German authorities had just announced that they were going to break holes in the Berlin Wall and declare Berlin an open city at midnight. The Cold War and false division of Europe were over. A different, more historically grounded division of Europe was about to open up, I knew. Instead of democratic Western Europe and a communist Eastern Europe, there would now be Europe and the Balkans. But who cared? I was definitely not where the Story was. It struck me just how far away from the Story, in both time and space, the Balkans were.

This excerpt from Robert Kaplan's politically influential travel book *The Balkan Ghosts* may serve as a compulsory introduction to the recent literature on the past and present of the Balkans. It is not simply a reflection on the invisible "Balkan Wall", but also a brick in that wall. It contains most of the myths which have governed Western perceptions of the region over the last decade. For a long time, writing about the Balkans was like making a journey in a valley of stereotypes. Now, when the Balkans are where the Story is—even more, now that the Balkans are the Story itself—the need for a radical re-reading and re-conceptualization of the Balkans debate is not just an intellectual but a political imperative.

'Imagining South-East Europe' is one response to this imperative. It is a book with both policy ambitions and artistic passion. Conceived by a team of historians, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and economists from all the Balkan countries (working both in the region and in the West), it does not form part of the latest stream of best-selling literature on the region. Indeed, the book neglects some of the fundamental questions of established 'Balkan studies'. It does not elaborate on where the Balkans are (geographical borders); who is 'inside' and who is 'outside' the Balkans (imaginary borders); nor who is guilty and who is innocent (the borders of responsibility). In the definition of the authors, the Balkans simply include all the countries involved in the Balkan wars of 1912-13. These wars are what is usually cited in justification of the notion—and 'ideology'—of the 'bad, mad Balkans'.

The book is sparing with criticisms of the West. At a time when many scholars are ‘discovering’ the role of the West in ‘Balkanizing’ the Balkans, the book resists the seductions of the post-colonial paradigm. It is also sparing with criticisms of ‘ancient ethnic hatreds’, religion, communism, and even post-communist nationalism: for example, Slobodan Milosevic is mentioned only seven times in a book of 333 pages, an achievement in its own right. The book is also cautious with data deriving from economic history and with the pathetic claims of modernization theory. In general, it is suspicious of all grand explanations of the origins of Balkan misfortunes.

The title ‘Imagining South-East Europe’ better than anything else indicates the ambition of the authors to influence actual decision-making. The book tries to invent South East Europe rather than to imagine the Balkans, and the project has much more to do with the construction of the future than with the explanation of the past. Paradoxically, the future has always been absent from traditional discourse on the Balkans. The Balkans are by definition conceptualized as history, as the past. But in order to understand the Story you can sometimes try to forget History. The obsession with history and the dominance of historical discourse is one of the keys to understanding the failure of the Balkans debate. In this context this is a strange book: it looks rather lonely on the library shelf.

‘Imagining South-East Europe’ in fact has two mothers. One is a book, the other a war. Intellectually, ‘Imagining South-East Europe’ would be impossible without Maria Todorova’s book Imagining the Balkans. Todorova’s concept of Balkanism, and her deconstruction of the invention of the Balkans in the popular and policy imagination of the West, are points of departure not just for the academic, but also for the new political debate in the region. Many different political and intellectual parties tried to enlist Todorova as an ally in this debate. Nationalists read the book as a judgment against the hypocrisy and imperial domination of the West. The present democratic elite in the region read it as an excuse for their lack of objectivity with respect to the West. Academics read it as a source of inspiration. Todorova’s study makes all attempts to view the West as a mere outsider or arbiter in the course of Balkan history either cynical or incompetent. The new debate that started with Todorova’s book replaced the old questions about the uniqueness of the Balkans with the new one of how we should think about the Balkans from now on. In her preface to the Bulgarian edition of the book Todorova, presently a professor at the University of Florida, wrote that if she was living in Sofia she would have written a different book. But what kind of book would Todorova have written?

‘Imagining South-East Europe’ tries to give one possible answer. Following Todorova in her passion for non-trivial interpretation, the authors consider the other side of the ‘Balkanization project’, namely, how the Balkans have imagined Europe, selecting and applying European models, using a European vocabulary of modernity, and building European institutions, not to mention how the very idea of escaping from the Balkans and entering Europe has brought to the region both communism and ethnic cleansing as ‘solutions of last resort’. It was a strong desire for European modernization and a disgust with nationalism and