

Western Balkans: Does the Past Determine the Future? Pictures of South Slav Reality

Tamara Djermanović. Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona

The Balkan region is still deeply marked by the stereotypes created by the Western vision as well as by the past of a people in which long periods of peace have been the exception. 2014, which commemorates the centenary of Gavrilo Princip's assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Habsburg, the event that unleashed the First World War, is an occasion to revise the view through which the West and the Balkan countries themselves have created the historical perspective of this region. In order to overcome these prejudices and stereotypes and economically redirect the region in the European context of economic crisis it is necessary to put an end to the savage neo-liberalism that currently characterises the Balkan countries, and which has created something that was almost non-existent in Tito's Yugoslavia: enormous social inequalities.

“The vision of Balkan history, very often built upon hoary clichés and trite symmetries, has been actively nourished by the countries of the area themselves. Any journalist or traveller who has passed through them over the last few years knows about the overwhelming tendency shown by many of their inhabitants to recite the interminable glories and tragedies of their national histories [...]. The national question and the clichés of history are almost the obligatory prelude to any conversation.”

Francesc Veiga, *La trampa balcánica*

The present and future of the Western Balkans or, more specifically, of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Croatia and Slovenia, is still seen and measured from its historical perspective. Is this because in this region of Europe the

long periods of peace are rather the exception? “The Balkan people have spent too long amidst suffering, violence and injustice, and have become accustomed to endure with silent grumbled entreaties or with protests expressed out loud – depending on the era and

the circumstances,”¹ writes “Yugoslav” Nobel Prize winner Ivo Andrić (1892-1975).² The writer, born in Bosnia, studied in Sarajevo, Zagreb, Krakow, Vienna and Graz and then lived most of his life in Belgrade. He became a militant of Yugoslavism even before the formation of the first Yugoslavia, although he asserted that the South Slavic union is in the long term unattainable “for hatreds that are dormant but lie in wait for their moment.” “I sometimes wonder: could it be that the spirit of many of the Balkan peoples is poisoned forever and that perhaps they will never do anything other than endure the sufferings or cause them?” reads another of his pessimistic reflections.³

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Another great account of the mental characteristics of the South Slavs that refer to the present (and the future!) is the anthropogeographical and ethnographical essays of the Serbian anthropologist Jovan Cvijić (1865-1927): “Like a spider, man spins a web around himself. He spins it with the material of historical prejudices, national prides, degenerate lifestyles... This web isolates him from the rest of the world and makes him archaic. No other reason can so compromise

the development of the South Slavs like this way of thinking,”⁴ wrote the author. Cvijić travelled through the Western Balkans between 1887 and 1915, investigating and talking to the people. He believed that observing directly in situ in the Balkan countries led to more precise results than in Western Europe, “because the South Slav population has not developed, changed or come together during the progress of civilisation.”⁵ In his writings we find a dual orientation: on the one hand, romantic-Herderian, when he speaks of the virtues of the people of these lands (brave, sensitive, spontaneous, honest, imaginative, etc.); on the other, analytical-critical of the Balkan mentality, as he emphasises the historical traumas still reflected in the behaviour of the people and their fate (uncontrolled, belligerent, excessively proud, fickle). Andrić and Cvijić warned of the enormous weight of the past for the present and future of the ethnic groups that live in the Western Balkans, and many of their reflections sound quite prophetic today.

Moreover, in the West there has always been a tendency to regard the Western Balkans from a preconceived posture riddled with stereotypes. The conflicts unleashed with the breakup of Yugoslavia, rather than being pacified, were only aggravated from outside. Francesc Veiga argues: “Above all, the wars in the former Yugoslavia, and especially the one in Bosnia, had such an impact on the West that the wave of passion generated affected not only public

1. ANDRIĆ, I., “Prokletstvo *homo balcanicus*” (“The Curse of the *Homo Balcanicus*”), in *Balkanski psihološki tipovi (Psychological Typology of the Balkan People)*, Belgrade, Prosveta, 1988, p. 153.

2. With Croatian parents, born in Bosnia when it was still under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, this writer was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1961 when Yugoslavia was a united country. He worked in the diplomatic service in several European cities, including Madrid. Upon his return to the Berlin Embassy on the eve of the Second World War, he left politics to devote himself to literature and lived in Belgrade until his death. Given all these circumstances described here we say he was a Yugoslavian writer, although Andrić is one of the few South Slav legacies to which Serbians, and Bosnians and Croats, want to lay claim.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

4. CVJIĆ, J., “Psihičke osobine Južnih Slovena”, in *Balkanski psihološki tipovi*, Belgrade, Prosveta, 1988, p. 11.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 16.



Nuclear shelter in Zlatar, Bosnia and Herzegovina (Tamara Djermanović).

opinion but also the political class, which made the search for remedies to the conflict more difficult.”⁶

The Long Shadow of the Sarajevo Attack

In 2014, with the commemoration of one hundred years since the start of the First World War, in the West it is once again claimed that “a Serbian terrorist’s shooting of the Austrian Archduke in Sarajevo began the war,”

while in the South Slav lands (although not all) it is recalled that Franz Ferdinand was the representative of the invading Austro-Hungarian Empire occupying this zone of Europe and that his assassin, Gavrilo Princip, a member of the multiethnic group “Young Bosnia” (*Mlada Bosna*), acted to free the native population from foreign occupation. In Tito’s Yugoslavia⁷ “Young Bosnia” was considered a revolutionary organisation. From 1990, the Sarajevo attack started to be interpreted according to everyone’s national(ist) orientation: Croats and Bosniaks said it was a shot against

6. VEIGA, F., *La trampa balcánica*, Barcelona, Grijalbo, 2002, p.11.

7. The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was officially created in 1943 and its dismemberment began in June 1991 with the self-proclamation of the independence of Slovenia and Croatia. The Yugoslavian constitution reformed by Josip Broz Tito in 1974 stated that all the republics have the right to self-determination, including the right to secession.

a civilised Europe, represented by the Empire that controlled the region; while the Serbians claimed that a compatriot had tried to defy a great invading empire. Currently, Bosniak children are taught that Gavrilo Princip was a terrorist, while Serbian pupils learn that he was a national hero. In the middle, fortunately, there are independent voices that try, at least now, to prevent the past from acting against the present (and the future). This is the case of the young Bosnian historian Minel Abaz, who in his letter to the Sarajevo authorities about their plan to raise a monument to Franz Ferdinand in 2014 points out that: “The archduke and heir of the Habsburg dynasty, Franz Ferdinand, was a reactionary Germanic racist, whose visit to Sarajevo was to exhibit himself militarily to frighten Serbia and prepare for an imperialist war, which was the only way out of the capitalist crisis of the time.”⁸

The famous filmmaker Emir Kusturica, on the centenary of the Great War and concerning what happened in Bosnia, his native land, proposes a revision of the trial of Gavrilo Princip and “Young Bosnia”

It is unlikely that this political analyst’s warning will stop the raising of this statue, which will contribute to a certain historical revisionism in which the heir to the Austrian throne is presented as an innocent victim, while Gavrilo Princip is portrayed as an executioner, terrorist and Serbian nationalist. Moreover, the year 2014 will reveal more details about the Sarajevo attack which will prevent things from only being seen in black and white, a tendency that has been growing in the West since the

wars of the 1990s in this part of Europe. In this context, the story of the defence lawyer of the “Young Bosnia” group, Rudolf Cistler, is interesting. The judges believed they had him under their control because of his origin – his father was Austrian and his mother Croatian – but they were quite mistaken. The young lawyer defended Princip with a strong legal argument full of moral principles, which contrasted with a public opinion that called for the death penalty for “terrorists and criminals.”⁹ In the end, Cistler not only lost the case but had to go into exile from Sarajevo until the end of the war. He later published a book, *Cómo he defendido a Princip y compañía* (“How I Defended Princip and Company”), which has now been used for the script of Srdjan Koljević’s film, to open in 2014. “Sensing the heartbeats of these young men of Sarajevo who acted on ideas of freedom, social justice and South Slavic state union in the Republic of Yugoslavia” is what the Bosnian playwright Dino Mustafić wants to recreate in the play which will also tour several countries of the former Yugoslavia in 2014. This play focuses on Princip and his friends, “a dramatic story about some romantic dreamers who remained loyal to their utopia,” explains the playwright.¹⁰ “His mind was fixed on the Serbian people and five hundred years of oppression. He acted, Gavrilo would later say, out of love for the former and revenge for the latter; his pride, you could say, had blinded him to the wider context of history and the fatal teetering of the world’s empires as they readied to implode, taking with them millions of lives,” explains David James Smith in his excellent book *One Morning in Sarajevo*.¹¹ For his part, the famous filmmaker Emir

8. <http://www.6yka.com/novost/47421/pismo-mladog-sarajlije-sarajevu-ne-treba-spomenik-francu-ferdinandu> [consulted: 14/3/2014].

9. VLADIMIR, S., “Princip, ¿héroe o terrorista?”, *La Vanguardia*, 17th February 2014, p. 9.

10. STANKOVIĆ, R., Interview with Dino Mustafić, *NIN*, No. 3296, 27th February 2014, p. 54.

11. SMITH, D.J., *One Morning in Sarajevo, 28 June 1914*, Cheshire, Phoenix Press UK, 2009, p. 3.

Kusturica, on the centenary of the Great War and concerning what happened in Bosnia, his native land, proposes a revision of the trial of Gavrilo Princip and “Young Bosnia”, bearing in mind that the motive for the attack was to protest against Austro-Hungarian occupation.

Emir Kusturica and his Prophecies

In the midst of war, Kusturica told the tragic history of the Yugoslavian project through his film *Underground*, written by Dušan Kovačević and also entitled *Once Upon a Time There Was a Country* (Palme d’Or in Cannes 1995). The film satirically shows how, in this part of the Balkans, someone who is a brother and friend today may become the main adversary tomorrow: Marko (Miki Manojlović) locks his best friend Crni (Lazar Ristovski) in an improvised underground bunker to manufacture weapons with the excuse that the war is continuing outside, while actually enjoying his friend’s possessions, including his wife. It is not the only feature film that earned him many enemies for showing a universal and critical perspective.

“The problem of the Balkans now fundamentally depends on Serbia,” says Kusturica in an interview given in February 2014, where he affirms that the whole region would have a much better future if it exploited its own agriculture. “I would plant fruit trees all along the borders of this country and export the fruit to all those countries that want it.” Moreover, the filmmaker argues that “we must not ask how much weaponry we have, but how much foreign advertising looks down on us from the posters.”¹²

Today, the filmmaker lives in retirement on a mountain in the Serbian village of Mokra

Gora, a few kilometres from the Bosnian border. In this pastoral landscape he has created Kustendorf, a small cultural theme park that hosts an international film festival that particularly promotes independent film, as well as attracting many stars of the seventh art who prefer a rural landscape with an exotic ambience and food to the red carpets.

The discourse of writers and artists, whether of Serbian, Bosnian or Croatian origin, is very different to that of politicians. The language of human creativity is universal and based on knowledge, uncertainties and feelings

Kusturica nostalgically recalls the times when Tito’s Yugoslavia was a non-aligned country, which during the Cold War represented an alternative to both the communist and capitalist blocs: “Now we are the most absurd country on the planet, and the most unfortunate. In the past, we took advantage of the world divided between two blocs. Since the disappearance of one of them, we have been slowly sinking. That’s why we don’t and never will have real politics [...]. Since my film festival began seven years ago, six different ministers of culture have visited Kustendorf! It is a tragedy for public life,” he concludes.¹³ Despite seeing Serbia as a country full of paradoxes, the filmmaker says that he finds it far more stimulating to live here than in the West (which he has done) “because of the greater feeling of freedom it involves.”¹⁴

The discourse of writers and artists, whether of Serbian, Bosnian or Croatian origin, is very different to that of politicians. The language of human creativity is universal and based on knowledge, uncertainties and feelings. This is also why communication at this level, between

12. JOVICEVIC, D., Interview with Emir Kusturica, *Nin*, No. 3296, 27th February 2014, pp. 10-14.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

creators of diverse countries who make up the former Yugoslavia, has never ceased. If a Croatian singer-songwriter who was famous in 1980 reappears in Serbia (or vice versa), he fills the auditoriums not only because of his music but also the nostalgia for times that, although no one asks for their return, from today's perspective seem more optimistic, innocent and secure.

The biggest nuclear shelter in this part of the Balkans, built between 1953 and 1979 in complete secrecy and with a budget of over four thousand million dollars, partially used and even attacked during the wars of the 1990s, was opened in 2011 to hold the contemporary art biennale, proclaimed the most important cultural event of that year in Europe. Currently it belongs to Bosnia and Herzegovina, as it is hidden inside Zlatar mountain, near Konjic, and is an emblematic venue for holding multi-cultural and transnational initiatives. But can a young Croatian, Bosnian or Slovenian artist feel the weight of references of Tito's era through the labyrinths of this shelter, meticulously equipped to survive a nuclear attack of up to 25 kilotons?

The current youth of Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and so on, know little of Tito's Yugoslavia. The consumer society, which in this part of Europe also measures everything in terms of commercialisation and clientele, has meant that university courses in business management are now in high demand when before they were non-existent. Unemployment, no prospects and insecurity – elements that in Yugoslavian life hardly existed – means that many long to seek their future in a foreign country.

Apathy, Fatalism and Economic Crisis

The low participation in the political elections of all the new South Slav states is not hard to

understand. To the deep-rooted fatalism, a possible influence of the multi-secular Ottoman Turkish presence in much of the region, we must add the apathy of post-war times. Moreover, the political and ideological colour of the new power seems to matter less to the people than the question of who will give the citizens what they most need right now: a better life economically. This also includes the question of which politician will be most willing and able to oppose corruption and control a savage neo-liberalism that in countries with a socialist or communist past has created enormous social inequalities, which barely existed before. This is something shared by Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Slovenia, with minor nuances.

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Alongside discriminate privatization is the attempt to breathe life into many dying state companies and other irrational manoeuvres. Moreover, most of the population prefers to buy products of major foreign brands rather than looking for local products, which are probably less adulterated and also cheaper. This is another consequence of not yet having been disillusioned with capitalism and of yearning to participate in its symbolic manifestations, even if this means sitting in the restaurant of a large foreign chain instead of a local bar, something that any westerner would prefer.

“Serbia has not known how to use the few loans it has been granted in the development of its agriculture and in infrastructures,” bemoans the economist Vladimir Vuckovic. “The advantage is that with little money great progress could be made if people stopped being so irrational and if, moreover, they understood that

in neighbouring countries such as Romania or Bulgaria, which are now in the EU, salaries and pensions are lower,” argues this member of the Fiscal Council. Paying taxes is generally difficult to accept in ex-communist countries and most people in ex-communist Europe imagine that in the West, although they talk of crisis, they live the life shown by the advertising hoardings: in abundance and with everyone smiling. It must be said, however, that these societies have a considerable advantage over the capitalist West: they have not had time to mortgage themselves so much and the majority do not yet live under the maxim “time is money”.

Europe or Byzantium?

It seems that the historical maps of the Western Balkans of the first centuries of our era already marked an orientation that has lasted until today: looking towards the Latin West or towards the Byzantine past. In the year 395 Theodosius outlined the *limes* between the Western and Eastern Roman empires just where the current border between today’s Croatia and Montenegro passes, at the mouth of the Bay of Kotor. Happily, members of the European Union, Slovenia and Croatia do not even consider themselves part of the Balkans. Bosnia and Herzegovina, on the other hand, is a country that still suffers from its status as a land in-between, with “four different and antagonistic calendars,” as Andrić said when explaining how in Sarajevo, in a radius of half a kilometre, you can find the Orthodox church, the Catholic cathedral, the Bey’s mosque and the synagogue.¹⁵ Serbia is a divided society in which more than rights and lefts, nationalism and Europeanism, the populist rural still con-

fronts the urban civic. In Montenegro and Macedonia this is even more prevalent, although nobody there sees the EU as an enemy. With Kosovo, the main problem is not about whether it is definitively lost for Serbia but guaranteeing that the small Serbian population that has not gone into exile can live safely and with dignity, which currently does not happen. For the Kosovo Albanians themselves eradicating the activity of the local mafias is still a pending issue, as it is a zone with a high concentration of the drugs trafficking routes of this part of the Balkans.

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In 2008 I travelled through all these new South Slav states that used to make up my old country, Yugoslavia. I found many dissatisfied, lifeless and suffering people everywhere, always a good breeding ground for all kinds of fanaticisms and radicalisms. I also confirmed something written about by some experts but which I did not want to believe: Yugoslavia was an artificial creation, difficult to sustain. More than settling scores with the past, my trip helped me find answers to something I found incomprehensible: despite the heterogeneity of the peoples who made up the old Yugoslavia, how could a war break out? 23 years after the start of the breakup of Yugoslavia, the only thing one can dare state with certainty is what I conclude in my book *Viaje a mi país ya inexistente* (“Journey to My Non-Existent Country”), which I wrote inspired by this trip: “There are no countries predestined to war, but only social, economic and political circumstances that make it possible, in a specific

15. See Andrić, I., “A Letter from 1920”, in *The Damned Yard and Other Stories*, London and Boston, Forest Books, 1992.

historical moment, for the executioners of their own people to call the tune.”¹⁶

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16. Tamara Djermanović, *Viaje a mi país ya inexistente, retorno a la Antigua Yugoslavia*, Barcelona, Altaïr, 2013, p. 13.