“Are we in or out?”
The Political Construction of a New Category –

The Western Balkans as ‘the New Other’ of Europe

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- The central aim of this lecture will be to reflect on the various regional names used in the Balkan as tools for stigmatisation and exclusion. This view will be in direct line with the main topic of this years BBB Film Festival “Tagged in a changing world”.
Critical studies

- Questioning the Western world/hegemony in defining boundaries – region building
- Inter-disciplinary approach that combines history, political science, philosophy, connected to Marxist theory, sociology, anthropology, and human geography;
Based on the works of Maria Todorova (1997) and Pal Kolso (2016), the lecture will propose a cultural critical perspective on ‘othering’ as in the Balkans after the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the end of the Cold War.
In the 90's the word 'Balkans' often functioned as a stigma.

In the 2000's a new category was invented to fight against this stigma (or to deepen it?) - the 'Western Balkans' became a common denominator for non-member states in South Eastern Europe.

This is symbolic process with political consequences that affects also artistic discourses.

The case study on Angelina Jolie movie
Aim of the presentation

To investigate the dynamics, persistence and manifestations of the practices of alterity making that take place in Europe regarding its neighboring region – the Balkans

a. *Where* are the Balkans?
b. *Who* created the “Balkans’?
c. *What* are the symbolic connotations of the word “Balkans”?

To illustrate these ideas

- **Case study** – Angelina Jolie’s movie “The Land of Blood and Honey” (2012)
a. Where are the Balkans?

- Ex Yugoslav countries?
- Romania, Bulgaria, Greece?
- Turkey?
a. Where are the Balkans?

- The map is a **symbolic** construct
- The map is a **result of knowledge and power**, not just geography
- The map is a **result of complex of political and economic processes** together with ideological constructs
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It's not hard to respect borders. You see the borders and you respect them.

—Jens Stoltenberg
Inside Europe, outside Europe—or an ambivalent position?

- The term “Balkans” retains the double character of being simultaneously of Europe and outside Europe, which Todorova saw as the defining characteristic of the earlier Balkanism discourse.
- Those who used the word often implicitly questioned whether ‘the Balkans’ really belong to Europe at all.
- Political and historical discourses (that have nothing to do with geography) placed the “Balkans” in an unsettling ambiguity.
THE PRESENT EUROPE IS UNFINISHED BUSINESS UNLESS THE BALKANS ARE A PART OF IT.

Paddy Ashdown
2. Who ‘tagged’ the “Balkans’? 

‘Regions are invented by political actors as a political program, they are not simply waiting to be discovered’.

(Iver Neumann, 1993)

Symbols and mechanisms of region-building
2. Who ‘tagged’ the Balkans?

- Towards the end of the 1990s the term ‘Balkans’ entered the official vocabulary of the European Union, now with the prefix ‘Western’.
- ‘The Western Balkans’ became a common denominator for non-member states in south eastern Europe.
- A survey in 2011 in the ‘Western Balkans’ showed that those who live there to a large extent share this view: membership in Western organisations (Gallup Balkans, 2011)
Europeanization – Re-naming the Balkans?

- What can redeem a people in this part of Europe from the stigma of being ‘Balkan’ is membership in Western organisations, in particular the EU.
- The EU determines whether a country is ‘European’ or ‘Balkan’.
- Deep down, membership of the EU is the pivot around which the Balkanisation/Europeanisation debate revolves.
- After 2003 – Thessaloniki Summit - the quality of being ‘Balkan’ is attached to those countries that remain outside the EU.
Europeanisation - the process between EU and candidate countries

- From a discursive perspective, Europeanisation is defined as the construction of inter-subjective meanings through which actors’ preferences and identities evolve.
Europeanization?

- Those who wield the power to define the terms – have the power to set the agenda.

- EU’s definitional agenda-setting: the power to define geographical regions. (i.e. Balkans, Eastern Partnership countries etc)

- Such processes entail two aspects:
  - what the region should be named; and
  - where its boundaries should lie.

Those aspects have profound symbolic and political consequences.
The power in the international arena lays in the opportunity to define, to give attributes to political realities – symbolic ownership.

To homogenize the diversity of a region is a form of exercising control over it.

Iver Neumann
Tagging=Owning ‘the Balkans’

- Ostensibly a geographical name, ‘Balkan’ turns out to be a political categorisation.
- The negative valorisation of the Balkans - started outside the region (Todorova).
Tagging=Owning ‘the Balkans’

 ‘Europe ends where politicians want it to end’

(Todorova 1997, p. 139)

 In 2016 we may add:

‘Europe’s politicians also decide where the Balkans end’.

(Kalsto, 2016, p. 433)
c. What are the symbolic connotations of the word “Balkans’”?

- Balkans as stigma
- Why does the word “Balkans” carry negative connotations?
- “in cultural and political discourse it carries a heavy historical ballast and very often functions as a stigma” (Todorova 1997, p. 183)
Balkans – connected with violence (wars)

- Western scholars and western media have discussed ‘the bloodbath’ during the wars in the former Yugoslavia with references to an alleged ‘Balkan culture’ of violence.
- Dissolution of former Yugoslavia - Wars in Bosnia, Kosovo. Macedonia – entered into popular culture – stereotypical images of war.
- Bosnia in particular, and its besieged Sarajevo – became a powerful symbol.
Reflecting on the reductionism and stereotyping of the Balkans

How could one region become the most pejorative term in international relations, history and the intellectual discourse at large?
The Balkans are part and were always part of Europe

The Balkans are the Other – the negative image of the West

The West used the Balkans in order to define itself with merely positive attributes – rich, successful, heroic, democratic etc
What she defines as *balkanism* was formed gradually in *the course of two centuries* and crystallized in a specific discourse *around the Balkan wars and World War I*. The *Balkanist discourse* has affected intellectual traditions and institutions.
The discourse on the Balkans as a geographic/cultural entity is overwhelmed by a discourse utilizing the construct as a powerful symbol, which is taken for granted as a reality.
An important distinction!

The Object of Observation

The Reflection of the Object in Discourse – Representation
An important distinction!

The Western discourse about the Balkans (the constructed reality) overlaps with The Balkans as reality.
María Todorova shows that “The Balkans began losing their identity once they began to Europeanize”. (Todorova, 1997:134)
Case study – Angelina Jolie’s movie “In the Land of Blood and Honey” (2012)
“In the Land of Blood and Honey” (2012)

- Jolie's two protagonists are **Bosniak Muslim painter Ajla (Zana Marjanović)** and **Bosnian Serb policeman Danijel (Goran Kostić)**:

- In the film's early pre-war scenes, which suggest Sarajevo as a paradise of an ethnic melting pot, they appear about to launch themselves into a heartfelt relationship, but a bomb blast in the dancehall where Ajla and Danijel meet puts a dramatic stop to it.
The Hollywood version of Bosnia?

- Angelina Jolie - Hollywood Star – this was her debut as a film director
- Also a UNHCR goodwill ambassador
- Her choice of material – the mass rapes committed by Bosnian Serb forces during the 1992-5 Bosnian war
The title – the ottoman terms – “Balkan” blood and honey

- Balkans = war
- Violence
- Genocide
- Rape
- Patriarchal society
- Masculinity
- Ethnic hatred
The Balkans as a war zone/ where there are no rules

- Jolie often underlined that the movie was a collaborative effort:
  - The actors, who are natives of the Balkans, helped finalize the script based on their own experiences during the war
  - People in the Balkans define themselves based on the Western stereotyping
Conclusions

- The position of what came to be known as Western Balkans was defined in relation to Europe (Western Europe).
- When talking about the Balkans, Western Europe actually talks about itself in a contrasting mirror.
- Space is filtered through knowledge and power.
EU’s Other: Western Balkans as a Persisting Alterity

- The map is a discourse
  with an in-depth political, economic, ideological connotations of ownership –
telling us a lot about the one who makes the map than the territory itself.
In my view - The Balkans are....
The legacy of EU’s “unfinished business” in the Balkans

- Haunts EU’s prospects for security and stability in its neighbourhood and to damage EU's role as a global actor.

By defining the Balkans with negative connotations, this tells us something about EU, NOT ABOUT THE BALKANS per se.
“Geographically inextricable from Europe, yet culturally constructed as the “Other”, the Balkans became in time the object of a number of externalized political, cultural and ideological frustrations and have served as a repository of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of the “European” and the “west” was constructed.”

Maria Todorova
Thank you very much.