EU enlargement through the — achieved or forthcoming — accession of the Balkan countries has not brought about an enlargement of the average knowledge about and interest in the Balkans as an particular European region. As the avalanche of publications about the conflicts in Yugoslavia and the almost complete disregard of the post-1989 developments in other Balkan countries indicate, attention is paid to the Balkans only when it is afflicted by misfortune. This attitude has led to a regrettable ignorance of local sensibilities and cultural traditions, resulting in errors of judgment by international decision makers’ dealing with the Balkans.

In fact, Europe became interested in the Balkans in the beginning of the nineteenth century due to the political tensions that were emerging in this region at that time. Western Enlightened ideas about civil rights and freedoms and national self-determination entered the Balkans and turned into a factor contributing to the destabilization of the autocratic Ottoman Empire which the Balkans was a part of. However, many of these tensions were to a large extent provoked by the European Great Powers themselves. They were related to the international issues which from the mid-nineteenth century onwards were known as the “Eastern Question”. Russia supported the Balkan national movements in order to further weaken the Ottoman Empire with the aim of acquiring free access to the Mediterranean through the Bosphorus. Western powers did their utmost to maintain the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire or — if this failed — to have a hold over the new independent Balkan states in order to prevent the Russian fleet from controlling the eastern Mediterranean and endangering Western sea routes to the Near East and Asia. The Balkans peoples themselves became the plaything of the Great Powers and were often used against each other. As a result, the Balkans was perceived as a troublesome region and the term “Balkan Peninsula”, which was introduced in the 1830s, from the very beginning acquired a pejorative connotation. As the national movements in the Balkans reached their peak (in the 1870s) and the new Balkan states embarked on enlarging their respective territories at the expense of the Ottoman Empire or of each other (during the 1912-1913 Balkan Wars), this unfavourable perception was even reinforced. Finally, the accelerated construction of a European identity in the early 1990s — the time of the Maastricht Treaty —, coinciding chronologically with the Yugoslav crisis, seems to have required an essentialization of the Balkans in systematic opposition to a Europe which was rather wishfully imagined as ethnically and religiously pluralist and tolerant. Significantly, a conflict involving only (a part of) one single Balkan country, Yugoslavia, has almost invariably been called a “Balkan” war, thus stigmatizing the entire peninsula.

Thus, from the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Balkans has been regarded as a disordered and unruly part of Europe. However, the popular image of the Balkans as an area of “irrational ethnic conflicts” and “age-old ethnic hatred” is rather deceptive. Whatever one may think of the — famous or notorious — *pax ottomana*, Ottoman rule created the conditions for various ethnic and religious communities to coexist without major conflicts with each other. To be sure, the *pax ottomana* was based on religious segregation and discrimination of Christians and Jews by Muslims; however, the Ottoman authorities never attempted to systematically and violently Islamize the population and even if we assume that there was a considerable hostility between religious groups, relations between ethnic groups within the same religious community as a rule were harmonious. In general, people in the Balkan had much less “bad experiences” with each other than people in Western Europe, where prior to the Enlightenment ethnic and religious intolerance was paramount and nations were almost constantly engaged in lengthy and devastating wars.

Linguists cannot help noticing the striking similarities between the grammatical structures of the Balkan languages, constituting a genuine “Balkan linguistic union”. Victor Friedman, an authoritative Balkan linguist, explains these similarities referring to “centuries of multilingualism and interethn contact at the most intimate levels.” Anthropologists and
culturologists have revealed that these centuries of interethnic contacts also resulted in the emergence of a “Balkan cultural union” — a common Balkan culture, based on a shared moral (but also, for instance, aesthetic) value system. They discovered the same customs and habits, the same folk music (with features as diaphony and asymmetric rhythms), the same folk tales, the same ornaments on houses, pottery and costumes, the same popular beliefs, briefly the same mental make-up all over the peninsula. This does not mean that Balkan culture is uniform or homogeneous; on the contrary, it is quite diversified, but in a way that reminds of the dialects of a single language. Anyhow, the differences are regional and not national. All Balkan peoples share one single mentality, which in spite of all current divisiveness often generates a kind of mutual understanding and solidarity, especially in the presence of “Westerners”.

In addition, among people that shared one and the same religion — be it Islam or Orthodox Christianity — common “high cultures” emerged which even more blurred ethnic distinctions. By the end of the eighteenth century, common doctrines, common religious practices and liturgical feasts, the typical architecture and painted ornamentation of the Orthodox vaulted cross-in-square churches, the pilgrimage to the Holy Land, the use of Greek as the language of worship and cultural communication by virtually all Orthodox Christian intellectuals had created stronger feelings of cultural commonality than those characteristic of ethnic communities.

Only few scholars in the Balkans will agree with the concept of a single Balkan culture or of supra-ethnic religious communities that minimizes or even ignores the prominence of “national identities”, though this concept is generally accepted by Balkanologists outside the region. “National (high) cultures” in the Balkans were constructed by intellectuals in the nineteenth century as amalgamates of elements, selected from the local variants of the common Balkan (low) culture, language being promoted as the main distinctive feature. However, nation building was a process of Westernization in the first place. Balkan capitals, in spite of their symbolic function as the embodiment of national identity, are all “Western” cities, whose national character in most cases is limited to folkloristic architectural ornaments. Nevertheless, Balkan intellectuals as a rule are obsessed by national identity which they believe to be characteristic of all worthy manifestations of cultural life. They constructed national communities that were ethnically (linguistically, culturally, even racially) ‘pure’, occupying areas that were equally ‘pure’, that means in which the “other” (who in the ethnically mixed Balkans is always present) was systematically ignored. These “national identities” were not based on empirical observation, but moulded to serve political aims. Balkan “nation builders” always imagined national identities as different as possible from those of their neighbours in order to be able to draw clear-cut borders and to defend the nation against those neighbours’ territorial claims. Or they claimed adjacent territories themselves, labelling their populations as co-nationals who ought to live within the borders of their own nation state. In addition to “ethnic” rights, “historical rights” were resorted to as well. The fatherland to be restored after the abolishment of Ottoman rule was the mediaeval kingdom or empire — the Byzantine Empire, Tsar Symeon’s Bulgaria, Tsar Dušan’s Serbia — at the moment of its largest territorial expansion. And again, the re-established state had to be, just like the mediaeval realm allegedly was, ethnically and religiously “pure”, that means without “others” and especially without “Muslim others”. Through education, media, arts, official commemorations et cetera, the nineteenth-century understanding of the national character, of the nation’s history with its victories and defeats, of the alleged injustices suffered by the nation and the nation’s allegedly justified claims gradually turned into a “national creed” which is not tolerated to be disbelieved in or critically assessed, especially by foreign scholars.
The Balkan intellectuals’ fixation on national identity results not only from nation and state building concerns, but also from the awareness of its actual immaturity and an ensuing lack of self-confidence. The modern Balkan nations came into being only in the nineteenth century in circumstances of unremitting suspense about the criteria distinguishing one nation (including one’s own) from another. Under Ottoman rule, religion and not language or ethnicity was decisive. In the nineteenth century, Albanian, Bosnian, Bulgarian and other Muslims in the Balkans thought of themselves as Turks, just as many Orthodox Albanians and Bulgarians considered themselves to be Greeks. Croats, Serbs and even Slovenes were perceived and perceived themselves now as one nation, now as different nations, as did the Bulgarians and the Macedonians. The formation of clear-cut national identities was a painful process, requiring a dramatic mobilization of all intellectual forces and in many cases even the use of violence. In addition, as the new Balkan nations (including the Turks) wanted to construct a national identity that was “European” and increasingly perceived themselves with the Orientalist bias of Westerners, they faced the impossible task to cleanse their identity from all “Oriental” elements that had remained from five centuries Ottoman rule. At the same time, due to the traditional anti-Catholic attitude of the Orthodox church or to the influence of Russian radical socialist thinking, many people in the Balkans rejected Westernization (involving secularization and capitalism), with the surprising result that among the sincerest advocates of Westernization were in fact the progressive “Turcophiles”, supporting of the ambitious Tanzimat reform project, launched by the Ottomans.

People in the Balkans are to blame themselves as well for the bad image their region has abroad. Their obstinate insistence on the role of armed freedom fighters and guerrilla warfare and on heroism and martyrdom in their respective national histories (or national mythologies) has in fact reinforced the image of the Balkans as an area of bloody ethnic conflicts abroad. In reality, the concern for modern education and the commitment to democratic reform have played a much more prominent role in many of the Balkan national movements — a fact which unfortunately is not reflected in most Balkan history books but deserves to be kept in mind by those who deal with the Balkans. Fortunately, there is in the Balkans an increasing number of courageous scholars who are inclined to an understanding of the past not in terms of heroes and martyrs and from a narrowly national perspective should, but in a “European” spirit of pluralism and tolerance. They do not occupy important academic positions, they hardly have any substantial influence on public opinion and they are powerless to prevent politicians from resorting to populist and nationalist discourses. It might be wise, though, in addition to all other measures insisting on regional cooperation, free access to international media and modernization of university education, to support these scholars by involving them in international projects and policy making and thus increase their authority at home. Only they can, in the long run, bring about the change in mentality that may free the Balkan communities from their obsessive preoccupation with ethnic and national issues and turn into tolerant and open-minded civil societies. Unfortunately, the Flemings and the Dutch for the time being are not in the best position to teach lessons to others on how to overcome nationalism and xenophobia.

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