1. European Identity and the Balkan Frontier

This chapter unfolds the theoretical framework that constitutes the main axis of the study. The linkage between European identity and Balkans identity requires the establishment of specific theoretical connections; accordingly, a set of core concepts will be employed in the following analysis. In examining the various theoretical approaches, the author considers it important to map the framework from the perspective of the following theoretical schemata.

The first scheme is based on the theoretical concepts initially examined by Charles Pentland in *International Theory and European Integration* (1973). The second scheme is derived from Richard Robyn's framework in *The Changing Face of European Identity* (2005). The third scheme, by contrast, is grounded in scholarly explanations of Balkan identity, which rest on three theoretical stances: primordialism, constructivism, and continualism.

The linking concept between these theoretical representations is the 'frontier image', which explains the relationship between European identity and Balkans identity. It highlights how the 'in-betweenness' position of the Balkans has influenced the construction of its image as the 'Other' of

Europe, and how this ‘otherness’ has, in turn, contributed to the formation of European xenostereotypes toward the region.

1.1 Identity and the Question of Belonging

Definition

The term *identity* derives from the Latin *identidem* (idem et idem), meaning “repeatedly” or “again and again” (Oxford Latin Dictionary 1968, p. 820). The etymological origin already suggests continuity and reiteration, pointing to identity not as a fixed essence but as a process shaped through repetition and recognition.

Since this study analyses the relevance of the European identity discourse in the Balkans by examining the relations between Europe and the Balkan Peninsula, particular attention is given to the factors that have shaped this relationship.

With this idea in mind, the first part of the work brings together discussions of the European and Balkan identity; in

the second part, the analysis instead focuses on the relationship between the European Union (EU) and the Western Balkan (WB) states, remaining within the framework of the European identity.

In this context, to avoid misinterpretation of the concepts, it is necessary to clarify what the author means by Balkan identity and the WB.

Despite the difficulties in defining the Balkans geographically, politically, or culturally, this study treats Balkan identity as the result of a self–other interaction process in which ethnic collective communities are continuously constructed and reconstructed under the pressure of external forces.

Accordingly, Balkan identity is not treated as the outcome of a static or homogeneous process. Rather, identity remains open and continuously negotiated, a condition that becomes particularly relevant in the case of multi-ethnic communities. For this reason, the existence of a single, unified Balkan identity is conceptually problematic.

What the author stresses most is the cogency of the self–other relationship in the creation of an image shaped through continuous interaction, serving as a process of in-

clusion or exclusion. In this case, Balkan identity as a concept is treated as Europe's "other".

This approach helps to provide a more complete understanding of the position of the Balkans in European politics, how the consequences of this position have affected European policies in the aftermath of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and how these outcomes may influence the European identity discourse in the event of the future integration of all Balkan states into the EU.

In this context, the WB states, as an EU concept introduced in 1998 during the Austrian Presidency, include all countries currently in the phase of accession negotiations. Specifically, they include: Croatia (the only exception, as it is already an EU Member State), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo.

1.1.1 The Idea of Europe and the Construction of European Identity

The debate on European identity continues to generate questions regarding its conceptual boundaries and definitional clarity. Scholars continue to debate whether

European identity should be understood as symbolic representation or as a substantive form of political identification; whether it operates at a conscious or unconscious level; and whether it functions as a reflective construct or as a taken-for-granted framework of belonging.

In light of developments since the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community, two principal models can be identified in the literature concerning the formation and development of European identity: a functionalist model and an identity-based model (Sanders et al. 2012, p. 111). Among the most relevant lines of inquiry is that developed by Charles Pentland, as examined and published in his seminal book *International Theory and European Integration* (1973).

According to Pentland, functionalism and pluralism remain the core theoretical positions that explain the development of European identity within the framework of European integration. Functionalists approach European identity from an economic perspective, asserting that modern developments will lead towards greater cooperation, thereby rendering the creation of political unity in Europe unavoidable. By contrast, pluralists tend to view European integration as a process in which the preservation of national sovereignty

remains important despite the desire for cooperation (Pentland 1973). As noted by Robyn, both supranationalists and pluralists share, to some extent, the same interest in the success of European integration, differing primarily in the speed of the process and the structure of governance (Robyn 2005).

However, as Robyn argues in *The Changing Face of European Identity*, Pentland does not explicitly account for nationalism as a factor that, despite developments in international politics and the economy, remains essential for understanding the paradox that renders the relevance of the European identity discourse highly debatable (Robyn 2005).

How the initial goal of the European project in strengthening economic ties among EU members has halted, on the other hand, the process of bringing closer the cultural heterogeneity within the EU landscape explains why the emphasis on a common European identity at the macro level remains limited to creating an invented Europe constructed on uncertainty, rather than a political community that shares a set of common cultural values and follows the same political interests.

This became evident especially after the 2004 enlargement, in which the validity of the European identity argument was challenged by the reality that the discordance between the physical and cultural boundaries of what was considered Europe and what was considered European gave rise to a whole new debate on what European identity should be in the future. Questions of who should be considered European and who feels European moved the discourse towards identity and citizenship, while at the same time reinforcing doubts about where the natural and cultural limits of Europe lie, what the citizens of Europe understand by Europe, and how they are attached to it (Bruter 2005).

The endless efforts to find a formula for reducing these doubts by reconciling cultural Europe with political Europe generated many paradoxes, such that in the following years the debate shifted gradually towards considering the whole concept merely as an elite project rather than a realistic approach that could be applied at the level of nation-states (Stråth 2000).

In recent years, however, the debate has taken multiple forms. Amid competing critiques and theoretical perspectives, the discussion has increasingly suffered from conceptual over-extension, reflected in three principal problems:

First, European identity remains primarily a conceptual problem. The theoretical literature emphasises the complex interaction among diverse types of identity, often without achieving conceptual precision. Second, idealistic expectations of a common European identity do not fit with the actual European political community. Third, the topic's relevance to Europeans' lives is far from what might be expected in academic circles and within the European institutional establishment (Kaina et al. 2015).

Hence, despite being highlighted as a concept that can replace the nation, its content remains vague in attempts to make the creation of a pan-European identity possible. Consequently, most recent theories consider the entire discourse a cacophony that requires a reconceptualisation at the discursive level (Lucarelli et al. 2011; Zielonka 2014).

1.2 Europe and the Balkans: Frontier, Inclusion, Exclusion

However, if a re-conceptualisation is necessary, the argument risks entering a vicious circle without a conclusive ex-

planation of what European identity signifies in methodological and substantive terms (Cerutti 2011).

Before proceeding with the analysis of the relationship between European identity and Balkan identity, it is necessary to clarify the distinctions between Europe as an idea, European identity as a form of collective identification, and the European unification project.

Hence, in the following, this sub-chapter seeks to understand these differences based on the argument of Gerard Delanty and his theoretical approach published in his seminal book *Inventing Europe: Idea, Identity, Reality*.

As Delanty argues:

> Defining Europe is then fraught with problems, for Europe is a protean idea and not something self- evident. It is erroneous to regard Europe as merely a region for the simple reason that it means different things to different people in different contexts. Europe does not exist any more naturally than do nations.
>
> (Delanty 1995, p. 3)

In his analysis, Delanty maintains that the idea of Europe should be understood at a higher level of abstraction rather than mirrored in the image of nation-states. It cannot claim universal validity, for it represents a cultural model, construct, and reproduction. As it started merely as a perception of Europe in terms of its geographical boundaries, it evolved subsequently into a politico-cultural product moulded by the fall of the Roman Empire, the Muslim advance, and the division between the Western Roman Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church in 1054 (Delanty 1995, p. 28–29).

In this context, the idea of Europe does not have its roots in reconciling cultural differences within Europe as a geographical entity, but in the transcendence of the sense of superiority of Greco-Roman culture, supplanted by Christianity on one side— and in the creation of division line between the Occident and the Orient on the other.

The consolidation of the idea of Europe took place only during and after the fifteenth century, with the beginning of the Age of “Discovery”, during which Europe started its path as an autonomous discourse. Subsequently, the idea was transformed into European identity, referring to Europe no longer as a geographical area but as a system of “civilisa-