# EUROPE AT THE FRONTIER

## Identity, Recognition, and Integration in the Western Balkans

*A Comparative Study of Croatia and North Macedonia*

Aniseta Uraj

# EUROPE AT THE FRONTIER: IDENTITY, RECOGNITION, AND INTEGRATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

## A Comparative Study of Croatia and North Macedonia

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A Monograph

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# Bibliographic Note

The author's academic background encompasses history, philosophy, pedagogy, metaphysics, cybernetics, international relations, and European–Asian studies, forming an interdisciplinary foundation that informs both past and current research. This work originates from a Master's thesis completed in 2018, examining the construction of European identity in the context of European Union enlargement, with a particular focus on Croatia and North Macedonia, and exploring the relationship between political integration, identity formation, and public perception in the Western Balkans. Revised for publication with minor linguistic, structural, and terminological updates—most notably the adoption of the name North Macedonia following the Prespa Agreement—the work retains its original arguments, framework, and empirical basis. It represents an early but systematic engagement with questions of Europeanization and identity, and stands as both a contribution to ongoing debates and a reflection of a broader scholarly trajectory.

# Preface

This work originates from a Master's thesis completed in 2018, conceived as an inquiry into the construction of European identity in the context of European Union enlargement, with particular focus on Croatia and North Macedonia. The study explores the relationship between political integration, identity formation, and public perception in the Western Balkans, a region historically positioned at the intersection of competing cultural, political, and civilizational frameworks. In this context, the question of belonging—who is considered European, and under what conditions—remains central to both scholarly debate and institutional practice.

The manuscript has been revised for publication while preserving the original analytical framework, core arguments, and empirical findings. Revisions have been limited to linguistic refinement, structural clarification, and the updating of terminology where necessary. In particular, references to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia have been replaced with North Macedonia, in accordance with the Prespa Agreement and subsequent international usage. The empirical data and interpretative lens reflect the period

in which the research was conducted and should be read within that context.

The decision to publish this work in its revised form is grounded in its role as an early stage in the author's academic development. It represents a first systematic engagement with questions of Europeanization, identity, and enlargement policy, while also documenting a broader intellectual trajectory. At the same time, the themes addressed—identity, inclusion, and the dynamics of integration—remain relevant to ongoing discussions concerning the future of Europe and its political and cultural boundaries.

The arguments presented here do not claim to offer a definitive account of European identity. Rather, they aim to contribute to an evolving discourse by situating the Western Balkans within the broader European project and by examining how institutional processes intersect with historical experience and public perception. In doing so, the study highlights the continuous tension between integration as a political objective and identification as a social and cultural process.

# List of Abbreviations

- EU – European Union

- WB – Western Balkans

- CEE – Central and Eastern Europe

- SAP – Stabilisation and Association Process

- SAAs – Stabilisation and Association Agreements

- RCC – Regional Cooperation Council

- NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

- EB – Eurobarometer

# Table of Contents

# Introduction

*"We are what we make of what
the others have made of us."*

*— Jean-Paul Sartre*

The question of European identity has remained central to debates on European integration. From early reflections on the idea of Europe to contemporary discussions on enlargement, belonging, and political community, the issue of identity continues to shape both scholarly inquiry and institutional practice. While economic integration and legal harmonisation have advanced substantially, the formation of a shared political and cultural identity within Europe remains contested.

This debate becomes particularly salient when examined from the perspective of the Western Balkans. Historically positioned at the intersection of empires, religions, and political systems, the region has often been conceptualised as Europe's frontier. Its integration into the EU has therefore carried not only institutional and economic implications but also symbolic and identity-related dimensions. Enlargement toward the Western Balkans raises broader questions: How are boundaries of belonging defined? To what extent can

political integration foster identification? And how do societies at Europe's periphery perceive the project of European unity?

This study examines the relationship between European identity, recognition, and integration in the Western Balkans, with particular focus on Croatia and North Macedonia. It argues that while European integration provides institutional frameworks and material incentives, the internalisation of European identity remains uneven and mediated by historical experiences, national narratives, and perceptions of recognition. The frontier position of the region continues to shape both external representations and internal self-understandings.

The analysis proceeds in two stages. First, it explores the conceptual relationship between European identity and Balkan identity, emphasising processes of inclusion and exclusion. Second, it examines how Europeanisation policies interact with national perceptions in Croatia and North Macedonia.

The empirical focus reflects the diversity within the Western Balkans. Croatia, as a member of the European Union, represents a case of completed accession. North Macedonia,

as a candidate country, represents an ongoing negotiation of recognition and integration. The comparison allows for a structured examination of how differing institutional positions affect public attitudes toward Europe.

# 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-

tion" values (Delanty 1995, p. 30). This transformation was crystallised only in the late nineteenth century as a result of gradual evolution since the Enlightenment, subsequently reflected in the lives of European citizens and movements (Delanty 1995, p. 30).

For Delanty and Rumford (2005), European identity is a form of self-recognition and exists as a constellation of diverse elements articulated through emerging repertoires of evaluation and social imaginaries (Delanty and Rumford 2005, p. 56). However, what remains important in the authors' argument is that European identity was born in defeat rather in victory. By moving beyond its foundations in Hellenism, Christianity, and earlier cultural conceptions of Europe, European identity gradually shifted from a primarily cultural form to a political one.

This transformation occurred through encounters with external civilisations—the "Other"—as well as through internal divisions within Europe itself. The context in which European identity emerged was not one of cultural homogeneity, as deep cultural divisions and historical discontinuities prevented the formation of a single, unified European identity. As a form of political consciousness, European identity emerged from the growing dichotomy between Self

and Other, or West and East, as well as from the national struggles among European nation-states. In pursuing their particular interests, these states appropriated the universalistic legacy of Christendom, thereby maintaining the division with the East and reinforcing the dominance of the centre over the periphery (Delanty and Rumford 2005, p. 35).

In this context, European identity assumed a dualistic form, as the continuous process of convergence and divergence between European and national identities prevented the emergence of a fully pan-European identity. Therefore, the final goal of unifying Europe under a common European identity remained questionable throughout.

With regard to the question of whether European unification is possible, it is important to recognise that both the idea of Europe and that of a European identity have largely remained elite-driven projects. As such, they represent top-down initiatives rather than bottom-up processes, where political engagement and social struggle might give them concrete form and render them more realistic and accessible to citizens. Today, "for many Europeans unity is a cherished goal only so long as it is unattainable, or indeed as a strategy to enhance social exclusion or to strengthen the power of the centre over the periphery" (Stråth 2000, p.1).

Hence, the relevance of treating European identity as a unifying myth lies in what Bo Stråth observes: "Europe is so diluted that it means everything and nothing" (Stråth 2000, p.13).

### 1.2.1 Interpreting Balkan Identity: Theoretical Perspectives

Despite sustained criticism of the idea of a common European identity, modern Europe—framed institutionally as the EU—continues to exert significant influence over its citizens. Freedom of movement, educational mobility, and economic integration have reshaped everyday life across the continent. These structural transformations demonstrate that Europe functions not only as a political project but also as a lived reality (Duchesne 2008).

Yet the central question remains whether this institutional and material integration translates into shared identification, particularly among societies positioned at Europe's periphery. It is at this point that the Balkan case becomes analytically significant.

To address this question, the analysis now turns to the relationship between European identity and Balkan identity, beginning with an examination of the historical and conceptual relations between Europe and the Balkans.

As mentioned in the introductory part, the analysis is based on three main theoretical stances that offer different approaches to the argument: primordialism, constructivism, and continualism. Furthermore, the literature draws on key works by Cvijić (1918), Iorga (1925), Billig (1995), Bechev (2004), Hatzopoulos (2008), and Todorova (2009) as representative contributions to these scholarly traditions. Delanty (1995), Delanty and Rumford (2005), and Stråth (2000) serve as the principal references linking the discussion of European identity with that of Balkan identity.

As previously discussed, the idea of Europe has been shaped as a cultural construction originating in Western European nation-states. It has remained, to a significant extent, their cultural model—one that has functioned less as an inclusive framework and more as an exclusive frontier for other regions of Europe, particularly Eastern and South-Eastern Europe (Delanty 1995). Treated as transitional zones between Europe and Eurasia, these regions have been marked by a constructed sense of 'otherness' that has

hindered their full integration into Europe's core cultural and political sphere.

This remains the reason why tensions between Western Europe and the rest of the continent have continuously created cultural and political fractures, thereby sustaining the paradox of European cultural diversity, which, on the one hand, represents a source of benefit, cooperation, and innovation for its citizens but, on the other hand, remains a primary cause of traditional divergences. The spatial manifestation of this core–periphery dynamic can be observed in representations of Europe that differentiate between a consolidated centre and a transitional margin (Figure 1).

As Bo Stråth argues in *Europe and the Other, Europe as the Other*, the image of Europe becomes an element within national self-understanding (Stråth 2000). In this interaction, the "Other" that reflects Europe represents the "Other" as an element of "Us". This dynamic has generated persistent cultural and political fractures between Western Europe and its peripheries (Stråth 2000).

If this point is analysed from the Balkan perspective, the whole argument reinforces the author's main statement on

the idea of European identity in relation to national identi-
ties.



**Figure 1. Map of the Core and Periphery in Europe**

*Source: Brunnbauer & Klaus (2007)*

What renders the idea of Europe and European identity
problematic in the Balkan context is the region's ambivalent
position within Western European imaginaries. Often re-
ferred to as the "Near East" until the late twentieth century,
the region has long been framed through the imagery of the
'frontier' (Delanty 1995).

Nevertheless, despite the Turkish etymology of the word 'Balkans', meaning "mountainous terrain," the region cannot be reduced to a homogeneous Eastern space. The internal demarcation lines running through its multi-ethnic composition complicate the simplified Western perception of the Balkans as exclusively part of the Eastern world (Delanty 1995; Stråth 2000; Todorova 2009).

Historically, three major religious traditions—Sunni Islam, Roman Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy—have intersected and conflicted in the region, producing shifting civilizational boundaries since antiquity. The division of the Roman Empire in 395 A.D. under Emperor Theodosius introduced a new political and cultural boundary that ran directly through the Balkans, dividing the region into two spheres of influence. The Great Schism of 1054 further institutionalised this divide, separating the Western Roman Church from the Eastern Orthodox Church and reinforcing the Balkans' position at a civilizational crossroads. The subsequent Ottoman expansion deepened these divisions, embedding Islamic, Orthodox, and Catholic traditions within the same geopolitical space (Delanty 1995; Stråth 2000; Todorova 2009).

As a result, the Balkans became a zone of overlapping sovereignties and layered identities rather than a unified civiliz-

ational entity. This historical stratification reinforced Western European representations of the region as peripheral and unstable, a perception extensively discussed in the literature on Balkanism and European identity (Delanty 1995; Stråth 2000; Todorova 2009).

## 1.2.2 Contemporary Challenges to European Identity in the Balkans

In a paper published in the *Journal of New Eastern Europe* in 2017, the Croatian writer Miljenko Jergović warned public opinion—particularly within the EU institutions in the Balkans—of an increase in the process of de-Europeanisation in the region due to the growth of Turkish and Russian influence (Jergović 2017). Considering the extent to which European identity and Balkan identity overlap, this development is not surprising if European integration begins to engage with the Balkan *mentalité.*

In fact, an important element of the region's history—nationalism—is still strong, perhaps not in the form of nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalism, but in the form of a nationalism vested with pragmatism, which, despite the transformations induced by international institutions such as the

EU and NATO, remains questionable at the societal and political levels.

Continuous incidents and the reproduction of old memories in new forms of propaganda aimed at preserving the interests of political elites make this new nationalism tantamount to Billig's concept of "banal nationalism", where the idea of nationhood is regularly flagged in daily life, reproducing itself as a reminder of national identity (Billig 1995).

However, the question is whether nationalism in the Balkans is more particular compared to other regions in modern Europe and whether it is sufficient as an element to consider Balkan identity an incompatible *mentalité* for modern Europe.

Traditionally, Balkan history has been treated as the history of extreme nationalism, which, characterised by its ethnic dimension, remains different from the civic nationalism of Western European nation-states (Hatzopoulos 2008).

To clarify the difference and further elaborate the argument in relation to Europe–Balkans relations, a theoretical analysis is necessary. Three core approaches guide this argument: primordialism, continualism, and constructivism.

The primordialist approach assumes that ethnic identity derives from the "givens" of social existence—such as kinship, language, religion, and ancestry—and is therefore largely fixed (Geertz 1973).

By contrast, the second tradition, continualism, offers a more elaborated analysis, which, differently from primordialism, places the concept of ethnicity within the context of historical change. History counts; hence ethnic identities are not static, for they change over time (Bechev 2004).

The third approach, constructivism, represents the more recent and more revolutionary conceptualisation of the argument, supporting the idea that ethnic identity is not fixed. According to constructivists, ethnic identities are shaped by social, economic, and political developments rather than being predetermined. Moreover, individuals may possess multiple identities that evolve over time in response to these broader changes (Anderson 1983).

Returning to the primordial argument, in attempts to answer the questions "What is a nation?" and "What is nationalism?", primordialists consider nation and nationalism as the unaltered natural state of human existence, immune to historical developments (Bechev 2004, p. 17).

Among the scholars who have analysed Balkan nationalism from this perspective is Jovan Cvijić (1918), whose work has often been interpreted through the notion of *homo balkanicus*, associated with what later scholars describe as a broader Balkan "*mentalité*". However, as Hatzopoulos argues, *homo balkanicus*, in Cvijić's view, remains a simplistic and frozen image that evokes culture as the only element that defines and separates collective identities from each other, thereby diminishing the importance of other elements that are today considered equally important in analysing regional identity and nationalism concepts (Hatzopoulos 2008, p. 81–82).

Due to its simplistic nature, the primordialist argument has evolved into more elaborated analyses, which, in this case, bring into discussion the continualist perspective represented by prominent scholars in Balkan studies such as Nicolae Iorga (1925).

Differently from the primordialist view, continualists assign greater importance to historical changes embedded in the concept of *longue durée*. According to continualists, what distinguishes the Balkans in their specificities reflects the results of Ottoman influence. However, advancing a different argument, Todorova (2009) maintains that the Ottoman

legacy has been mitigated by modernity, as other factors such as modernisation and socio-economic structural transitions have played an important role in shaping the region (Todorova 2009).

Both positions offer a limited view of how nationalism and regional identity interact with collective identities in a way that makes Balkan identity appear more particular compared to other regions of Europe. As Bechev argues in his article "Contested Borders, Contested Identity: The Case of Regionalism in South-East Europe", both primordialists and continualists regard the instability of the Balkans as an intrinsic element of the region.

Among the different interpretations and theoretical stances, constructivists remain the most relevant in explaining why the Balkans represent an ambiguous entity. For constructivists, regional identity remains a political construction. Neither geography nor culture is immune to politics, and nationalism is not something that acts independently. What politicians and people do with their regional identity depends on them, for identity is not given; it is continuously constructed through interaction. In this context, the relation "self–other" or "us–them" remains important in understand-

ing how political decisions and collective perceptions define borders (Todorova 2009, p. 83).

In this context, one of the most distinguished constructivist scholars in Balkan studies, Maria Todorova, explains in her book *Imagining the Balkans* that, differently from what has been argued so far about the Balkans—treated within the framework of Orientalism—the complexity that characterises the region lies more in interstate politics. In opposing Said's Orientalism with the concept of Balkanism, Todorova argues that the negative image of the Balkans has been the product of international politics (Todorova 2009).

In support of this argument, Delanty's position becomes relevant: the roots of the Balkans' instability in their relationship with Europe lie in two main divisions—the first between Christianity and Islam, and the second between Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. "The conflict between Latin and Greek Christianity far exceeded the division between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. The result of this division was that the identity of Western Europe came increasingly to be expressed in an enduring cultural animosity. Orthodoxy was seen as semi-oriental and foreign to the identity of the Latin West" (Delanty 1995, p. 52).

These tensions became sharper during the succession of the Byzantine legacy under the Ottoman Empire. Despite the differences in the traditions of the two empires, tensions between East and West came to dominate the Balkan region. The centuries of Ottoman rule in the Balkans shaped its oriental contours and traditions, which were in constant conflict with those of the Latin and Orthodox worlds, thereby deepening the division between East and West. The stereotypes that have haunted the people of the Balkans and the region during the last two centuries are the result of these ethnic, political, cultural, and religious divisions, which, nevertheless, have not prevented European politics from foregrounding "Europeanness" and "Westernness" (Bechev 2004).

Therefore, in this context, what makes the Balkan *mentalité* incompatible with Western Europe requires the same attention to the self–other dichotomy as analysing the concept from the perspective of regional processes and historical developments.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the coined term of the day for the Balkans was "Turkey in Europe", while in the aftermath of the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia and the subsequent ethnic wars, "Balkanisation"

became a term that revived the memory of the old "powder keg" of Europe. Hence, the Balkan stigma has been applied at the regional level as a reproduction of old collective images, without considering how ethnicity and local ethnic structures have been used by external political actors to reinforce the image of Europe's advanced nations.

This important detail remains the main factor that has halted the normal process of state-building through the transformation of these local units into political identities integrated within state structures. Such a transformation would facilitate state-to-state cooperation and, consequently, make the integration of the Balkans as a political actor in European politics and the broader power system much easier.

Therefore, impartiality in the analytical process remains essential. It helps maintain a proper balance between internal and external factors. Defining regional identity solely through stereotypes does not contribute to meaningful integration. In this context, neither Europe nor the Balkans will benefit if divisions framed as "us" and "them" continue to revive historical grievances.

The creation of the EU has encouraged European elites to view the "Other" as part of a broader collective "Self." How-

ever, the strong influence of core Member States over those considered part of the "periphery" suggests that this shift in European political mentality remains incomplete.

## 1.3 Concluding Remarks

The frontier position of the Balkans has been decisive in shaping its relationship with Europe. Situated at the intersection of empires, religions, and political orders, the region developed multi-layered identities under sustained external pressures. Nationalism, as the most recent crystallisation of these historical trajectories, intensified internal fragmentation while reinforcing Western European perceptions of the Balkans as unstable and peripheral.

This constructed image has affected both regional cooperation and the broader integration trajectory of the WB within European political structures. If Europe has historically defined itself through civilizational distinction and centre–periphery hierarchies, the Balkans have often been positioned at the margins of this narrative.

The theoretical insights developed in this chapter therefore provide the framework for examining how European identity, when institutionalised through the EU, interacts with Balkan identities in practice. The next chapter turns to the process of Europeanisation in order to assess how these identity dynamics unfold within the context of EU enlargement and regional policy.

# 2. Europeanisation and the Western Balkans

*"We lie to [the EU] that we are serious about reforming,  and they lie to us that they are serious about accession."*

*(Tcherneva 2017)*

Whether reflected in the stagnation of Turkey's accession negotiations or in the renewed prominence of geopolitics in Europe, one point remains evident: the EU's engagement in the WB since the post-conflict stabilisation phase and the enlargement process requires reassessment. Developments over the past decades have raised questions about the coherence and seriousness of the EU's long-term regional commitment.

Current developments reveal persistent difficulties in the application of neo-liberal principles and the projected political mentality of modern Europe within the WB.

To continue the argument concerning the perception of European identity in the Balkans—and to re-assess the role of EU institutions in re-shaping the region's image—this chapter links the process of Europeanisation with the formation and transformation of Balkan identities.

## 2.1 Defining Europeanisation

Before addressing the Europeanisation of identities in the Balkans, it is necessary to clarify the concept of Europeanisation itself.

It must clearly stated that there is no single definition of Europeanisation as a concept. Among the various attempts to provide a conclusive answer to what Europeanisation is *per se*, particular importance has been given to the works of Sartori (1970) and Gerring (1999), who distinguish the concept according to its uses and the goals of the researcher. Essentially, the division lies in the theoretical and operational use of Europeanisation as a concept.

Due to this division, there has been a long debate on what Europeanisation is: whether it represents a concept, a theory, or a process; whether it can serve as an independent or dependent variable; and, above all, where one needs to look in order to prove its concreteness.

In its broadest sense, Europeanisation refers to the impact of the EU on potential Member States. However, scholars differ in their interpretations of the Europeanisation process: some view it as a top-down process that affects domestic

systems of governance; others as a bottom-up process; and still others as a cross-loading process that indirectly influences domestic policies through the projection ideas among potential Member States (Radaelli and Pasquier 2007, cited in Jano 2010, p. 25).

In this study, Europeanisation is understood as the impact of EU policies on potential Member States and on countries in the accession candidate phase. Accordingly, it is approached from a top-down perspective, which enables an explanation of the direct relationship between EU institutions and potential Member States in terms of explanatory power and causality.

### 2.1.1 Europe between Balkans and Western Balkans

In his 2017 State of the Union address, the President of the European Commission, Jean Claude Juncker, emphasised that Montenegro and Serbia, considered the "frontrunners" of this process, would be part of the Union in 2025, if not sooner, while excluding the other countries and ruling out the possibility of Turkey joining the Union in the foreseeable

future (European Commission 2018, p. 7). Violations of the rule of law and fundamental rights have halted Turkey's integration process, as Erdoğan's regime continues to be perceived as highly autocratic by EU Member States (Grajewski 2017).

This return of the EU to the Balkans after years of stagnation has raised many questions about the role of geopolitics and the increasing influence of other actors such as Russia, China, Gulf countries, and Turkey itself. Whether this return is merely a classic example of European pragmatism or whether the EU is genuinely interested in the Balkans' integration remains an open question (Dempsey 2017).

The importance of this issue in the context of European identity and Balkan identities brings into discussion the differences in principles and political mentality between the EU, on the one hand, and a region that remains burdened by its past, on the other. The neo-liberal principles on which EU politics are based continue to be challenged by the persistence of several problems in the Balkan region. Corruption, high unemployment, ethnic tensions, and a lack of trust in institutions—especially in the judicial system—remain the main issues hampering the integration process.

If the relationship between European identity and Balkan identities moves beyond theoretical concepts and confronts a reality in which the reform process reflects merely a "stabilocracy," rather than genuine engagement by both parties in moving closer to shared values and interests, the strength of the argument increases in seeking a conclusive answer to how EU institutions have so far reconciled Europe's past with the Balkans and how the possible future integration of the region into the Union could affect the European identity project (European Commission 2018).

Accordingly, by focusing in the following sections on the importance of the Europeanisation process and the obstacles associated with it, this issue becomes more comprehensible.

### 2.1.2 Cultural and political challenges

"If the term 'Balkans' had the negative connotations associated with the Oriental past, disorganisation, and the generally rickety character of government, and political instability or a region parcelled into quarrelling little states…" (Ristovic

1995, p. 4), this image has unfortunately changed little over time.

Hence, the question that arises is what the EU institutions have done to bring the WB countries closer to the core values, traditions, and political principles of modern Europe?

The main goal of the EU at the end of the Bosnian conflict in 1995 was to transform the Balkans into a secure region and integrate it politically and economically. The entire region underwent profound change in order to align not only with the pace of European economies and pluralist democracies, but also with the model required by the EU accession criteria.

This is relevant, as accession to the Union entails conformity with a specific economic, political, and social model, which, in the case of the WB, has required radical changes (Jano 2010, p. 11). But what do these changes consist of, and what challenges do they pose for EU institutions? Where should one look to re-assess the impact of Europeanisation on WB societies?

The inter-ethnic conflicts that broke out concomitantly with the dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation in 1991 once

again reinforced traditional stereotypes and essentialist interpretations of the Balkans. The Bosnian conflict was seen as a mere *déjà vu* of the events of 1914, and the Balkan peoples were perceived as largely unchanged since at the beginning of the twentieth century.

However, reforms in WB societies required a departure from this traditional path. As noted in the first chapter, the history of the Balkans has often been framed in terms of extreme nationalism, with expressions such as "Balkan mentalité" or "Balkanisation" used to describe the supposedly uncivilised aspects of Balkan societies and the medieval character of their politics. Yet, between historical reality and its misuse, the argument advanced by Misha Glenny in T*he Balkans: Nationalism, War, and the Great Powers 1804–2012* remains relevant:

> Balkans since the beginning of the 19th century has contributed substantially to a history that is not static – in which age-old enmities are doomed to permanent repetition – but breathtakingly dynamic.
>
> (Glenny 2012, p. xxv)

It is in this context that the EU sought to pursue a different trajectory in order to deconstruct the region's negative im-

age, which is largely rooted in the peculiarities of its identity formation—reflected in the interplay between ethnicity, religion, culture, and geopolitical interests—that has repeatedly generated similar historical patterns. In an effort to avoid the recurrence of such developments, the EU aimed to invest in areas crucial to the region's stability and economic progress, while simultaneously fostering a shared perspective among all countries in their progress toward EU integration.

However, between theory and practice, and between investments and tangible results, the challenges facing the region in its effort to become part of the Union persist. This is essential for understanding the relationship between the EU and the Balkans over the past decades and why the Europeanisation process in the region remains uneven.

Bringing the comment of Barbara Jelavich:

> The theme of the conflicting attraction to and rejection of foreign political, ideological, and economic influence has thus been a constant element in Balkan history. However, although Balkan societies, either willingly or under duress, have accepted much from the outside world, it must be emphasized that even where foreign institutions and

ideas were adopted, they were subsequently molded and changed to fit national traditions and prejudices.

(Jelavich 1983, p. xii)

This remains essential for understanding the relationship between the EU and the Balkans over the last decades and why the Europeanisation process in the region is still halting.

An important argument in this discussion concerns the influence of nationalism on identity and the nation-formation process, which, in the case of the Balkans, has been overemphasised as the main explanation for its comparatively late development relative to other regions of Europe.

In the Balkan countries, the ethnic dimension, rather than the civic one, has been predominant. Although most European states are ethnic-national in character, a dichotomisation of the concepts "civic" and "ethnic" persists (Table 1). Within the political culture of modern Europe, ethnic nationalism is often portrayed as the antithesis of liberalism. However, while the conflict in the former Yugoslavia has historically been framed as a clash between ethnic groups, a closer examination suggests a different interpretation.

| Western | Eastern |
|---|---|
| Political | Cultural |
| Staatsnation | Kulturnation |
| Civic | Ethnic |
| Liberal | Illiberal |
| Individualistic | Collectivist |
| Voluntarist | Organic |
| Rational | Mystical/Emotional |
| Universalistic | Particularistic |
| Patriotism | (Chauvinist) Nationalism |
| Constitutional | Authoritarian |

**Table 1. Civic vs. ethnic nationhood**

*Source: Spencer and Wollman (2002)*

The manner in which identity has functioned as a durable political instrument for personal ambitions and geopolitical interests reveals a more complex picture of the divisions under discussion (Caytas 2012).

However, despite the dominance of religious and cultural tensions throughout Balkan history, it would be an oversimplification to reduce the discourse to a mere division between ethnic and civic, or nationalistic and non-nationalistic, categories (Caytas 2012). In all parts of Europe, and at different periods of its history, elements of both concepts can be found.

Therefore, in this context, various factors require consideration, as the challenges faced by the EU over the last decades with regard to the WB lie not only in "democratisation, marketisation, and state consolidation" (Kostakis 2012, p. 6).

Instilling in Balkan societies and politics the principle of co-operation over fragmentation, through the abandonment of ethnic hatred and tensions, can in practice be considered the main challenge for EU institutions (Marazopoulos 2013).

The "big push," which effectively began with the Dayton Accords in 1995 (Marazopoulos 2013, p. 18), followed by sustained engagement by EU institutions in the region, led to the creation of a new political designation—the Western Balkans (WB)—comprising the most troubled countries in

the region (the former territories of the Second Yugoslavia, plus Albania, minus Slovenia).

The new designation became, in some sense, a newly constructed identity that would serve as both the recipient and the agent of Europeanisation—a signifier whose meaning would be shaped by EU "policy recipes," with the aim of replicating the success of the post-Soviet countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). But was this possible?

## 2.2 EU Enlargement and Regional Strategy

Following the constructivist logic, it can be argued that the WB are what the EU has made of them.

Emerging "… from a small bureaucratic department in the External Relations Directorate of the European Commission at the end of 1995" (Kostakis 2012, p. 20), the term became, from the 2000s on, the focus of new EU regional policies. However, no *ad hoc* strategy was developed that could operate at the micro level and stabilise regional cooperation.

The main approach of EU institutions was essentially based on two pillars: first, increasing regional cooperation among Balkan states after the dissolution of Yugoslavia; and second, focusing on the association and enlargement framework to transform candidate states into Member States of the Union (Kostakis 2012, p. 21).

From 1995 to the present, the entire period of EU engagement in the WB can be divided into six phases: 1990–1995; 1995–1999; 2000–2010; 2010–2014; 2014–2017; and 2017 –present. Each of these phases contains crucial moments that vary over time (Figure 2).

On this basis, dividing this engagement into distinct periods is, to some extent, unavoidable. The key developments within these phases relate, on the one hand, to regional dynamics and, on the other, to the response of EU institutions —largely reactive rather than proactive.
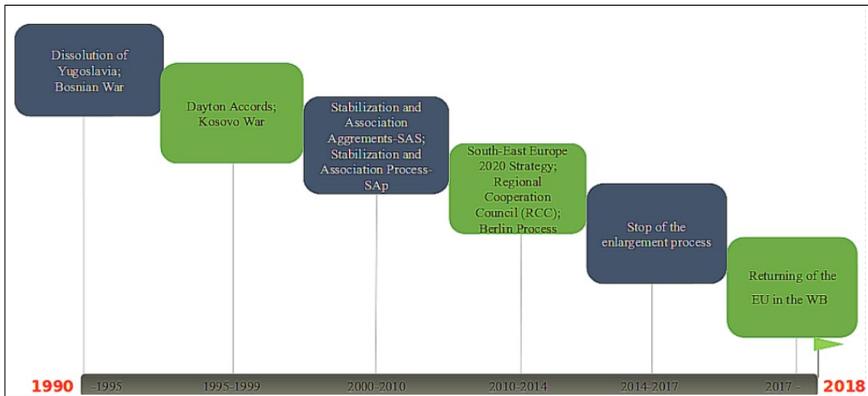
**Figure 2. Key moments in EU periodisation**

*Source: Author's diagram*

As illustrated in the timeline, the periodisation is based on the most important moments that, over time, have defined EU engagement in the WB.

Beginning with the first period, attention turns to the turmoil in the Balkans that began with the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1990, followed by the outbreak of the Bosnian War in 1991, which ended in 1995. During this period, EU engagement was largely confined to humanitarian aid and economic assistance and was not politically oriented toward developing a comprehensive strategy for the region.

By contrast, the second period, which includes developments between 1995 and 1999, including the signing of the

Dayton Accords and the Kosovo War, reflects changes in EU perceptions with regard to the Balkans, where the region—for security and stability reasons—received more focused attention, as reflected in the third period (2000–2010) with the signing of the "Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs)" and the "Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP)".

In maintaining cooperation with the WB countries, the fourth period (2010–2014) reflects more consolidated EU engagement in the region. The agreements between the EU and the WB signed in the previous period were reinforced by the introduction of the South East Europe 2020 Strategy, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), and the Berlin Process. These developments gave this period a more intensive character compared to the preceding one.

What makes the period 2014–2017 distinctive is that it began with the declaration by the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, in September 2014, which effectively halted the enlargement process for the WB countries, and ended with another declaration by the same President in December 2017, which gave the green light for these countries to resume the accession process under a new EU strategy.

Since 2017, the EU's activity in the region has slightly increased. The Commission declared that it would return in 2018 with new statements regarding the accession process for the WB countries.

Turning now to a more detailed analysis, the first period (1990–1995), often described as the "last Balkanisation" era, was marked by limited engagement by EU institutions, essentially aimed at "keeping the 'infection' at arm's length." Due to several factors, the EU's intervention in the Bosnian crisis, which erupted following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, was largely confined to humanitarian aid and assistance. As this period was characterised by conflict, chaos, and disorder, the EU's approach focused primarily on post-crisis reconstruction rather than on the development of a coherent political strategy toward the region (Jano 2010).

During the second period (1995–1999), EU engagement in the Balkans followed a different trajectory, as a new strategy was envisaged for the entire region with the aim of transforming it into a coherent regional actor. In 1998, during the Austrian Presidency, the EU introduced the concept of the Western Balkans (WB), which included Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Macedonia, Kosovo, and Serbia, while excluding Slovenia. This devel-

opment signalled a shift in EU perceptions of the region, which came to be regarded no longer as Europe's neighbouring "other," but as part of Europe itself (Jano 2010; Marazopoulos 2013; Prifti 2013).

However, despite investments in economic and political recovery, the EU's regional strategy was based primarily on bilateral agreements rather than on a comprehensive framework that could be applied uniformly to all countries under the same conditions. Moreover, the Balkans still represented a *terra incognita* for the EU, thus any initiative entailed engaging with a different political culture and, above all, a distinct historical legacy.

Nevertheless, what distinguishes the first and second periods is the EU's vision and perception of the region, as well as its objective of making it more secure and stable simultaneously (Jano 2010; Marazopoulos 2013; Prifti 2013).

By contrast, during the third period (2000–2010), the strategic importance of the region for the EU received greater attention, particularly after the Kosovo War. During this period, the EU took the initiative to implement a more coherent strategy by extending the prospect of enlargement to all WB countries. Unlike the previous periods, the EU's fo-

cus was now more directly linked to the Europeanisation process and the integration of the region into the Euro-Atlantic community (Jano 2010; Marazopoulos 2013; Prifti 2013).

However, despite this engagement, several limitations persisted. Progress conditionality was applied to all countries, irrespective of their proximity to EU membership. Enduring regional problems—such as corruption, economic stagnation, human rights concerns, weaknesses in the judicial system, institutional inefficiency, poor governance, and territorial disputes—constituted significant obstacles. Moreover, there was considerable variation among potential candidates and candidate countries in meeting EU accession conditionality. Consequently, progress in the reform process remained slow throughout this period (Jano 2010; Marazopoulos 2013; Prifti 2013).

From 2010 to 2014, relations between the EU and the WB became more consolidated, during which a series of new initiatives was introduced. The South East Europe 2020 Strategy, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), and the Berlin Process, along with progress in negotiations with several WB countries and the conclusion of Croatia's ac-

cession process, were among the most significant developments (Jano 2010; Marazopoulos 2013; Prifti 2013).

However, as in previous periods, the obstacles remained largely the same. Beyond the EU's strategy of maintaining and developing primarily bilateral relations within the framework of regional cooperation, persistent transition problems—reflected in weak democracies and poor governance—along with enduring issues such as nationalism and the rise of Euroscepticism and populist movements, were among the main factors hampering EU-driven reforms (Jano 2010; Marazopoulos 2013; Prifti 2013).

By contrast, the period from 2014 to 2017 marked an important turning point in EU engagement in the WB. In September 2014, the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, declared that there would be no further enlargement for WB countries over the following five years (European Commission 2014, p. 12). This pause—widely regarded as a consequence of the Eurozone and refugee crisis, as well as enlargement fatigue—created space not only for democratic backsliding in WB countries toward more traditional patterns often described as "Balkan mentalité," but also for renewed instability in the region. This instability was reflected in security incidents and in the

strengthening of Euroscepticism, nationalist movements, and Islamic fundamentalism (European Commission 2018).

In the most recent period (2017–present), the interruption of EU engagement in the WB came to an end. Due to several factors—most notably the growing presence of other actors in the region—the EU placed the Balkans back on its agenda by introducing a new strategy. This strategy set out more clearly defined timelines for accession and renewed emphasis on strengthening democracy and the rule of law, as well as increasing economic investment and cooperation as priorities for European institutions (European Commission 2018). Whether this renewed engagement will finally bring the WB closer to accession remains uncertain, as the process is still ongoing.

From this analysis, two main points emerge. First, throughout the discussed periods, the EU institutions have lacked a coherent long-term strategy for transforming the WB into a stable region in preparation for integration into the Union. It can be observed that during the first decade, concomitant with the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Bosnian conflict, the EU was primarily engaged in providing economic and humanitarian assistance. In the following decades, the pres-

ence of the EU became more visible through strengthened regional cooperation and a series of bilateral agreements. Nevertheless, the absence of a coherent long-term strategy slowed the reform process. After 2013—particularly following the decision of the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, to suspend further enlargement in 2014 amid the EU polycrisis—Euroscepticism and populism gained strength in the WB (European Commission 2014).

At the same time, other internal and external factors—namely the growing influence of Russia, China, and the Gulf countries—combined with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the refugee crisis further fuelled instability and democratic backsliding in the region. As a result, the overall process resembled one step forward and two steps back, turning the hopes of WB societies into disillusionment and creating renewed internal instability.

On the other hand, it was precisely because of these developments that the EU decided to re-engage with the region three years after Juncker's declaration. In 2018, the Commission made public a new strategy for the WB, outlining indicative timelines for the accession of certain WB countries by 2025. Additional support for the reform process was pro-

posed to facilitate negotiations for current potential and candidate countries, with particular attention given to Montenegro and Serbia, which were considered the "frontrunners" in the region's EU integration process (European Commission 2018, p. 7).

This particularistic tendency—accompanied by high-level protests in Balkan politics, where it was considered unfair in comparison with other countries—raises questions about the EU's choices and whether the importance of integration lies solely in economic indicators or whether additional factors are also taken into account.

Hence, the second important point emerging from the analysis concerns whether EU policies are genuinely aimed at making the integration process functional while taking cultural differences into account in the name of a common European identity, or whether priority is once again given to economic interests and geopolitics.

With this in mind, the final sub-chapter examines this question in greater details, within the broader discourse on European identity. The extent to which EU policy flexibility reconciles cultural considerations with market economy objectives and geopolitical interests—while overlooking the

importance cultural differences and societal perceptions—
remains a crucial issue.

### 2.2.1 Europeanisation in the Western Balkans: democracy, culture, or 'business as usual'?

> *How's the weather, Jeeves?*
> *Exceptionally clement, sir. Anything in the papers?*
> *Some slight friction threatening in the Balkans, sir.*
> *Otherwise, nothing.*
>
> *(Wodehouse 1923, p. 7)*

Had the European project started with culture rather than economic integration, as one of its originators, Jean Monnet, stated decades ago — "*Si c'était à refaire, je commencerais par la culture*" (If we were to do it all again, we would start with culture) (Monnet, cited in Juncker and Navracsics 2017) — today the idea of a unified Europe and a common European identity would reflect more than what the economy can produce.

The WB illustrate this reality raising the question whether the EU produces values and virtues or merely strategies

and interests. Fluctuations in EU engagement in the region make it difficult to avoid questioning the underlying causes of its lack of coherence and long-term vision.

This can be traced to two principal factors: first, the prioritisation of regional stability over democratisation, which has gradually become the dominant orientation of EU policy; and second, the conflation of geopolitical and economic interests, which over time has constructed an artificial framework over underlying cultural differences, thereby generating a dichotomous perception of the EU among Balkan societies — captured in the notion that visibility often coincides with perceived absence.

Certainly, the role of the EU in the recovery of the WB as a region cannot be questioned. Over the past few decades, EU institutions have contributed to greater regional stability by encouraging increased cooperation among countries, while emphasising the importance of setting aside ethnic hostilities.

However, despite the achievements made over time, the EU's return in 2018 with a new strategy for the WB did not reduce scepticism among Balkan societies and political elites. The reactions following the declaration designating

Montenegro and Serbia as "frontrunners" in EU integration once again raised the question of whether the objectives of EU policy are sufficiently credible to render the Europeanisation process in the WB viable. In short, is the EU genuinely committed to the democratisation of WB societies, or do once again economic considerations that determine which country moves closer to the EU?

Europeanisation is a highly complex process that lasts for years. Based on conditionality criteria, it is recognised as having both positive and negative impacts on the societies and countries that apply for membership in the EU (Vachudova 2008, p. 30).

In the case of the WB, the limits of the Europeanisation process in transforming these societies reflect different circumstances compared to the Central and Eastern European countries (CEE). The effort to treat the region as a single regional actor in order to facilitate reform has, based on the results thus far, prioritised regional security and stability as the primary concern of EU institutions. As a result, democratic transformation has become complementary to stability rather than constituting the core of EU institutional engagement.

To understand the importance of this argument and to situate the relevance of this issue within the discourse on European identity, it is necessary first to examine what has been Europeanised — and what has not — in the WB.

Given the historical developments, the main urgency in WB countries—alongside security and stability, which required constant attention from EU institutions—was state- and region-building through reconciling inherited ethnic hatred by constructing a triangle of communication between EU institutions, local and regional political elites, and the people.

In practice, EU investment has gradually followed a linear trajectory that has given rise to the so-called "stabilocracy" and "stabilocrats," terms referring to political actors who remain loyal to traditional political practices while simultaneously welcoming EU funds in exchange for promises to fulfil reform conditions (Tcherneva 2017).

Certainly, the positive steps towards fulfilling EU integration conditions—including leaving behind the era of Balkanisation and promoting the EU perspective and membership-building—reinforce the impact of the Europeanisation process in Balkan countries, which can be considered successful compared to the situation at the beginning of the 1990s.

However, persistent democratic backsliding into ethnic tension, nationalism, corruption, and other issues continues to create space for instability in the region.

According to the Freedom House 2017 rankings, all countries in the region experienced a decline in their democracy scores, with the most serious declines occurring in Macedonia and Montenegro (Freedom House 2017). Despite country-specific differences, the presence of similar issues across the region indicates that EU strategies aimed at building a regional identity through common institutions have failed to connect people across cultural, ethnic, religious, and historical divides. The absence of a firm line in EU policy, which prevents institutions from being intrusive in the politics of Member States as well as candidate countries, remains an important factor.

This line of argument suggests that the lack of coherence in EU engagement in the region has resulted in a situation in which, for the past 28 years, the EU has remained "one foot in, one foot out" of WB politics.

Moreover, an examination of the second point — the return of geopolitics to the Balkans in conjunction with economic interests — indicates that the EU's decision to re-engage

after 2017, as noted earlier, has reinforced not only the inconsistency of its policies but also its continued prioritisation of regional stability as a means of safeguarding economic integration.

This becomes particularly relevant as the reduced presence of the EU in the WB in recent years has created a political and economic vacuum, increasingly filled by external actors such as Russia, Turkey, the Gulf countries, and China, thereby reminding the EU of the continued importance of economic cooperation and geopolitics (Dempsey 2017).

Among these actors, Russia, although it has long maintained historical, cultural, and political ties with the region, currently exercises largely within the space created by internal and external constraints, most notably the inconsistency of EU engagement. Moreover, the enduring loyalty of regional nationalities and identities to traditional ethnic and religious affiliations further restricts the depth and scope of external influence (Esch and Remme 2017, p. 15, 99).

Turkey, has likewise sought to expand its role in the WB, drawing on historical legacies and cultural affinities to reinforce its political and economic presence. At the same time, the Gulf countries have increased their engagement primar-

ily through investment and financial flows, further diversifying the region's external partnerships (Esch and Remme 2017, p. 89, 98).

In this context, China's growing presence becomes particularly significant. Unlike Russia and Turkey, whose engagement is closely tied to the preservation of traditional geopolitical interests, China frames its role in the WB primarily in economic terms.

Nevertheless, while Russia openly pursues geopolitical objectives, China advances comparable strategic interests through economic cooperation and market expansion. The surge in Chinese investments across the WB under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) underscores China's position as an increasingly influential actor whose policies present a tangible challenge to EU investment and regional influence (Esch and Remme 2017, p. 66, 79).

Taken together, the expanding involvement of these external actors raises doubts about the credibility and strategic consistency of the EU's renewed engagement in the WB. Although the EU's reduced presence in recent years has often been attributed to the Eurozone crisis, the refugee crisis, Brexit, and other internal challenges, this does not di-

minish the significance of the fact that, notwithstanding its attention to other regions and priorities, economic integration remains its primary concern.

The manner in which this dynamic influences the integration process and the reform of Balkan societies is reflected in national perceptions, which tend to prioritise the tangible material benefits of reform over the core values of democracy. At the macro-regional level, EU policy has effectively transformed the reform trajectory of the WB into an "unfinished business," whereby, in the absence of a perceived threat from the region capable of undermining the European project, the EU concentrates on its internal priorities. Conversely, when external actors approach Europe's periphery, the EU re-engages.

## 2.3. Concluding Remarks

The analysis of Europeanisation in the WB reveals two central patterns. First, the EU's engagement has lacked strategic coherence, contributing to the emergence of political elites capable of rhetorically supporting reform while preserving nationalist narratives. Second, prolonged uncer-

tainty and inconsistent signaling have fostered public disillusionment and created space for external actors to increase their influence.

The Europeanisation process in the region therefore remains structurally incomplete. As long as integration is framed predominantly in terms of economic pragmatism and geopolitical containment, rather than as a process attentive to societal perceptions and identity dynamics, the consolidation of a shared political community will remain fragile.

If Europeanisation remains structurally incomplete at the institutional level, its societal dimension becomes even more significant. The sustainability of the European project in the WB ultimately depends not only on policy coherence but also on how citizens interpret and internalise the integration process. It is therefore necessary to move beyond macro-level assessment and examine how European identity is perceived within specific national contexts.

In this context, the following chapter introduces a comparative analysis of Croatia and North Macedonia, two cases that occupy different positions within the EU enlargement framework. By shifting the focus to national public perceptions,

the analysis seeks to determine whether institutional integration corresponds to deeper identification with Europe or whether material considerations continue to dominate.

# 3. Perceptions of Europe: Croatia and North Macedonia

*"European integration requires not only institutional reform   but also a transformation in the way Europeans think and act."*

*(Pentland 1973, p. 242)*

The previous chapter demonstrated that Europeanisation in the WB has operated primarily through a top-down institutional framework prioritising regional stability and geopolitical containment. The question that follows is whether this process has produced a parallel transformation at the level of identity and perception.

In this regard, the projection of Europe as a supranational identity layered over multiple national identities remains particularly challenging in the Balkan context (Scheck 2012, p. 17).

As Scheck argues in her book *Changing Identities in South-eastern Europe*, the EU's attempts to succeed in the integration project continue to face resistance due to the perceived threat that WB societies associate with the process,

which entails a renegotiation of traditional identities and the construction of new forms of knowledge based on shared perceptions of integration and accession. Therefore, the process requires the development of new and common cultural standards for intercultural cooperation and multicultural coexistence among the Balkan countries (Scheck 2012, p. 18).

From this perspective, the challenge is threefold:

1. The renewal of ethno-nationalism following the dissolution of Yugoslavia;

2. The reluctance to assimilate ethnic heterogeneity into a greater political entity;

3. Growing uncertainty generated by globalisation at the nation-state level (Scheck, p. 18-26).

The central question therefore becomes whether the EU's top-down policies can be domesticated in ways that reshape national perceptions of integration.

As already explained, the European project rests formally on economic and political integration. Yet critics have long

argued that economic transformation without cultural accommodation risks generating fragmentation rather than cohesion (Marshall 1996, cited in Robyn 2005, p. 7).

If cultural dimensions remain secondary to economic logic, European identity risks being perceived as transactional rather than normative. In the WB—where ethnicity, religion, and language have historically structured collective identity—Europeanisation remains in a transitional phase. The European "face" is still primarily associated with material benefits rather than with a deeply embedded cosmopolitan dimension.

The central questions are therefore:

• How do national perceptions in the WB reflect the limits of European identity construction?

• Do citizens interpret integration primarily through economic rationality or through identity transformation?

To move from macro-level institutional analysis to micro-level perception, this chapter focuses on two case studies: Croatia and North Macedonia. The empirical analysis relies on qualitative and quantitative data, particularly the Euroba-

rometer Interactive Opinion surveys and other research conducted by relevant institutes.

Croatia and North Macedonia share a common Balkan historical trajectory shaped by nationalism, cultural revival, and the instrumentalisation of history for political claims (Akhund-Lange 1998). In both cases, history, religion, ethnicity, and language have served as foundational elements of identity formation, while international politics has played a decisive role in structuring national development.

Nevertheless, their trajectories diverge significantly in their relationship to the EU. Croatia represents a case of completed accession, offering insight into identity dynamics following EU membership. North Macedonia, by contrast, reflects the experience of a candidate country navigating prolonged negotiations, recognition disputes, and fluctuating signals from the EU. The comparison allows for an assessment of whether institutional integration corresponds to deeper identification with Europe, or whether perceptions remain primarily shaped by material and pragmatic considerations.

In Croatia, perceptions of Europe—particularly of the EU—are intertwined with religious and civilisational narratives.

Latin Christianity has historically positioned Croatia within the symbolic sphere of Western Europe. Paradoxically, however, Croatian perceptions of the EU have remained sceptical. The absence of explicit religious reference in EU treaties weakens the symbolic connection between Europe and Christianity in Croatian public perception.

In North Macedonia, on the other hand, identity formation has been shaped by prolonged geopolitical contestation among Bulgarians, Serbs, and Greeks, alongside struggles for independence from Ottoman rule and from Greek ecclesiastical authority. This historical complexity has produced an identity configuration distinct from other parts of the region (Akhund-Lange 1998).

Thus, while both countries share structural similarities, their historical legacies generate different frameworks for interpreting Europe and European identity.

Another key dimension concerns the interaction between transition and economic rationality. EU integration is frequently interpreted through cost–benefit calculations rather than through normative alignment.

Croatia, now an EU Member State, experienced prolonged economic stagnation following accession. Although initial economic decline after membership is not uncommon, in Croatia the downturn was accompanied by persistent structural weakness (Vizjak and Vizjak 2015). This contributed to growing disillusionment among Croatian citizens and a relatively high level of Euroscepticism.

North Macedonia, by contrast, remains a candidate country since 2005. Despite internal instability and persistent transition problems, public perception toward integration has generally remained more positive. Economic rationality dominates public expectations, even though scepticism rises during periods of political crisis.

The comparative outcome is therefore instructive: different historical legacies and different stages of integration generate different scales of Euroscepticism, yet in both cases economic rationalism remains central.

Placing Croatia and Macedonia *vis-à-vis* the European identity discourse allows a micro-level assessment of how citizens interpret Europe:

• Is Europe understood as a cultural community?

• As a political project?

• Or primarily as an economic opportunity?

The analysis that follows examines how national percep-
tions in these two cases illuminate the broader question of
whether European identity in the WB is being internalised
normatively or instrumentalised materially.

In doing so, the chapter links individual-level perception to
the structural argument developed in the previous chapters:
that Europeanisation in the WB has prioritised stability and
economic integration, while identity transformation remains
partial and uneven.

## 3.1 Croatia

### 3.1.1 Identity and Integration: Historical and Political Context

Croatia represents a particular case where it is possible to
find a classical example of how national identity challenges
the EU argument on identity.

In this study, Croatia is analysed with the aim of taking a closer look at citizens' national perceptions with regard to Europe and European identity. The reason for selection lies in the specifics of the relationship between Croatia and Europe and the EU.

While on the one hand stands the historical legacy of Croatia and its traditional ties with Christian Europe, on the other, the attitude of Croatians and their Euroscepticism surrounding EU accession during the 2000s and afterwards illustrate why many Croatians do not approve a Union which does not represent Europe and its cultural heritage, particularly religion as a key element in Croatian national identity formation.

This argument reinforces the author's claim that economic and political integration, as the two main pillars of the EU, are insufficient to create the necessary conditions for a common European identity. Despite the 1973 Declaration on European Identity, which identified the "common legacy" of the Nine Member States of the European Communities (EC) as a foundation for such an identity (European Communities, 1973), and despite the subsequent re-conceptualisation of European identity as complementary to national and regional identities—providing citizens with an additional

set of rights, perspectives, and self-understandings (Lucarelli et al. 2011, p. 3)—the reality appears otherwise.

As the case of Croatia illustrates, the plurality of European cultural identities does not fully align with EU criteria. Whether grounded in the notion of a common legacy or not, these criteria continue to rely on "self–other" and "inclusion–exclusion" dynamics rather than embracing cultural differences under a single, inclusive framework.

These perceptions reflect a combination of "distrust in the European Union and distaste for membership" (Štulhofer 2006, p. 141) among Croatian citizens. While EU membership is often regarded as an unavoidable process, Croatians remain loyal to their nationalism and historical legacy, a particularity that once again highlights the relevance of the connection between national identity and the European identity discourse.

In this context, Croatia represents a case of completed accession within the WB region. Its path from post-conflict stabilisation to full EU membership provides an opportunity to assess whether institutional integration corresponds to deeper identification with Europe.

### 3.1.2 Croatian Identity Between Europe and the Balkans

The Croatian experience is particularly relevant given its historical positioning within both Central European and Balkan narratives. While accession signified formal inclusion within the European political framework, it remains analytically necessary to examine whether membership has translated into sustained normative alignment or whether identification with the EU continues to be shaped primarily by material and pragmatic considerations.

In a research study conducted in 2017 with 68 Croatian pupils from three different regions of Croatia (Ross et al. 2017), the researchers focused on exploring the pupils' feelings regarding their nationality, whether these were influenced by Croatia's position in Europe, and whether the pupils attributed any particular meaning to Europe. The results highlighted that the pupils' perceptions reflected traditional dichotomous stereotypes, portraying the Balkans as the uncivilised part of Europe, while positioning Croatia as part of Europe.

> No one wants to be part of the Balkans – for Croatians, the Balkans begin in Bosnia; in Bosnia, the Balkans begin in Serbia; and in Serbia, they begin in

Romani because of the prejudices of the Western countries.

(Andrija P. from Zagreb, Ross et al. 2017, p. 142)

While pupils' perceptions of Balkans were largely framed in terms of "us versus them" distinction, local differences constituted another crucial aspect of the research. The results indicated that, beyond the negative connotations Croatian pupils attributed to other countries, their perceptions also included— as is often the case—recognition of internal differences within their own country. As one participant, Agata from Rijeka, commented:

I think we are all proud of [Croatia] – but again, we are not friendly towards Serbians or Slovenians –we hate Slovenians – but again, we don't like each other in Croatia – I think it's like we are in Croatia, but we are separated in a lot of ways – we don't like people from Zagreb, because they are Purgeri [term used for Zagreb inhabitants], or people from Split or Dalmatia we call Tovari [Dalmatian word for a donkey, derogative term for Dalmatians].

(Agata N. from Rijeka, Ross et al. 2017, p. 136)

The results of this study indicate that, despite perceptions of local differences, identity stereotypes among Croatians concerning the Balkans and Europe continue to be structured

around cultural divisions between East and West. As the study concludes, Croatian schools teach that Croatia is not geographically part of the Balkans but rather positioned at the crossroads of the Mediterranean, Southeastern Europe, and Central Europe (Ross et al. 2017).

### 3.1.3 Analytical Approach and Data

However, to gain deeper insight into how Croatians think and feel about their position as both Balkan and European, it is necessary to approach the issue from another perspective. Examining additional data provides a clearer understanding of Croatian perceptions of the EU following the dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation.

The empirical analysis is guided by the hypothesis that EU membership does not automatically translate into deeper European identification. Perceptions of the EU are expected to remain predominantly shaped by material and pragmatic considerations, even after formal accession.

The analysis focuses primarily on Standard Eurobarometer surveys (EB67 – Spring 2007; EB88 – Autumn 2017) and the Parlemeter 2017 survey, allowing a comparison between two reference years, 2007 and 2017. These temporal markers enable an assessment of how perceptions evolved from the pre-accession phase to the post-membership context (Eurobarometer 2007, 2017; Parlemeter 2017).

The empirical examination focuses on three dimensions: (1) the perceived meaning of the EU, (2) levels of attachment to different territorial identities, and (3) the relationship between utilitarian motivations and normative identification.

### 3.1.4 Discussion and Interpretation

When asked what the EU means personally, Croatian respondents in both 2007 and 2017 primarily associated it with economic opportunity and freedom of movement. Normative dimensions—such as democracy or shared values—ranked lower (Eurobarometer 2007, 2017; Parlemeter 2017). Although minor variations appear across the two periods, the overall pattern suggests continuity rather than transformation in perception.

The persistence of economic prioritization even after accession indicates that formal membership did not substantially shift the symbolic meaning of Europe toward deeper normative identification.

Levels of attachment further reinforce this pattern. Croatian respondents consistently reported stronger attachment to their nation than to Europe or the EU (Eurobarometer 2007, 2017; Parlemeter 2017). While European attachment is not negligible, it remains secondary within the hierarchy of identification.

This suggests that EU membership has not displaced national identity but has instead coexisted with it in a layered structure of belonging.

Overall, the Croatian case demonstrates that institutional integration does not necessarily produce deep normative identification. While membership provides tangible economic and mobility benefits, European identity remains filtered through national frameworks. This finding complicates the assumption that accession alone fosters cohesive supranational belonging.

## 3.2 North Macedonia

### *3.2.1 Identity and EU Integration in North Macedonia*

In this sub-chapter, the analysis focuses on national perceptions, taking as a second case study North Macedonia which has been an EU candidate since 2005. The aim of this sub-chapter, as in the previous one, is to discover the perceptions of citizens with regard to the EU and to demonstrate how these perceptions can negatively affect the European identity discourse in the case of future integration of the WB into the EU.

The debate in North Macedonia with regard to EU membership is largely similar to that in other countries of the WB, where the lack of coherence in EU strategies and the limited presence in recent years have created overall disillusionment among citizens.

On the other hand, the fluctuations in the reform and integration process, reflected in continued democratic backsliding and related indicators, demonstrate that the Europeanisation process remains constrained by internal factors.

The most significant issues—most notably the name dispute with Greece (officially resolved in 2018) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Greece, 2018) and relations with minorities, particularly ethnic Albanians—have shaped public perceptions in North Macedonia, where attitudes toward EU membership are influenced both by ethnic and nationalist considerations and by utilitarian concerns stemming from economic and social conditions.

### 3.2.2 Public Perceptions of the EU and European Identity

This analysis, as in the previous chapter, supports the author's hypothesis through empirical data, and argues that EU policies and the broader impact of the EU on national perceptions in North Macedonia have not substantially transformed how citizens view the EU. As in the case of Croatians, perceptions remain largely framed in terms of economic benefits rather than cultural gains.

Without diminishing the importance of democracy—which continues to be valued by citizens—one reason for opposition to EU membership lies in concerns over potential

threats to the domestic economy and the perceived loss of national identity. Accordingly, the analysis aims to demonstrate how perceptions, similar to those identified in Croatia, may produce negative outcomes within the broader discourse on European identity, potentially contributing to weaker cohesion and creating further space for disintegration within the EU.

### 3.2.3 Data Sources and Comparative Framework

The analysis is comparative and examines the decade between 2007 and 2017. For the first question, however, the data refer to March 2008 rather than April 2007, as in the Croatian case. The analysis relies primarily on Standard Eurobarometer surveys (EB67 – Spring 2007; EB69 – Spring 2008; EB88 – Autumn 2017), supplemented by the Parlemeter 2017 survey and Dimovska's desk analysis based on the Spring 2016 Eurobarometer (Dimovska 2016; Eurobarometer 2007, 2008, 2017; Parlemeter 2017).

The research is divided into two parts. In the first part, the questions are addressed exclusively to North Macedonian

respondents. In the second part, the analysis includes two additional questions directed at both Croatian and North Macedonian respondents. This approach enables a comparison of Croatian and North Macedonian perceptions and their "we-feeling" with regard to the EU and Europe.

### 3.2.4 Discussion and Interpretation

When asked what the EU means personally, respondents in North Macedonia frequently associated the EU with economic opportunity, freedom of movement, and improved living standards. At the same time, normative dimensions—such as democracy and rule of law—retained visible significance (Dimovska 2016; Eurobarometer 2007, 2008, 2017; Parlemeter 2017).

Compared to Croatia's post-accession stability, perceptions in North Macedonia displayed a stronger aspirational dimension (Eurobarometer 2007, 2008, 2017; Parlemeter 2017). The EU was not only viewed as a provider of material benefits but also as a framework for international recognition and institutional normalisation.

The hierarchy of attachment in North Macedonia revealed a strong persistence of national identification, similar to Croatia (Eurobarometer 2007, 2008, 2017; Parlemeter 2017). However, attachment to Europe appeared more future-oriented and expectation-driven. Rather than reflecting post-membership consolidation, European attachment in this context functions as a projection toward desired integration.

Prolonged negotiations over name recognition and accession have intensified the symbolic dimension of European integration. In this context, identification with Europe may also reflect a strategic alignment with international legitimacy. The EU functions not merely as an economic project but as a normative reference point in the country's ongoing negotiation of identity and sovereignty.

Overall, the North Macedonian case illustrates that European identity operates within a dynamic framework of aspiration and conditionality. While economic considerations remain central, the EU also represents a mechanism of external recognition and political stabilisation. Unlike Croatia, where membership did not fundamentally transform identity hierarchies, in North Macedonia the integration process itself continues to shape identity perceptions in a more anticipatory and contingent manner.

Taken together, these observations illustrate how percep-
tions of the EU in North Macedonia are shaped by both his-
torical identity debates and pragmatic expectations linked to
economic and political stability. Although the country's insti-
tutional relationship with the EU differs from that of Croatia,
the patterns observed here raise broader questions about
how European integration is interpreted across the WB. The
following section therefore turns to a direct comparison
between the two cases in order to assess how differing
stages of integration influence national perceptions of
Europe.

## 3.3 Comparative Findings

The comparative analysis of Croatia and North Macedonia
reveals both structural similarities and contextual differ-
ences in the perception of European identity within the WB.

First, in both cases, European identification does not dis-
place national identity. The hierarchy of attachment remains
consistently anchored in national belonging, with European
identity positioned as secondary. Institutional integration,
whether completed or ongoing, does not automatically gen-

erate a consolidated supranational identity. This suggests that Europeanisation operates within pre-existing national frameworks rather than replacing them.

Second, material and pragmatic considerations dominate perceptions of the EU in both contexts. Respondents in Croatia and North Macedonia primarily associate the EU with economic opportunity, mobility, and improved living standards. Normative dimensions—such as shared values, democracy, or cultural belonging—play a role but do not outweigh utilitarian motivations. The persistence of this pattern before and after accession indicates that institutional status alone does not fundamentally alter the symbolic meaning of Europe.

Third, important differences emerge between the two cases. In Croatia, EU membership has stabilised perceptions of integration but has not significantly deepened normative identification. European attachment coexists with national identity in a layered structure of belonging. In North Macedonia, by contrast, European identification retains a more aspirational and recognition-oriented character. The EU functions not only as an economic framework but also as a source of international legitimacy and political validation. This reflects the candidate country's prolonged negotiation process and

the salience of external recognition in domestic identity formation.

Fourth, the findings demonstrate that Europeanisation is mediated by historical and political context. The frontier position of the Balkans continues to shape the region's interaction with Europe. Where accession is perceived as uncertain or conditional, identification remains cautious and expectation-driven. Where accession has been achieved, integration becomes normalised but does not necessarily transform deeper identity hierarchies.

Overall, the comparative evidence supports the central argument of this study: European integration influences political structures and economic opportunities, yet its capacity to reshape collective identity remains limited and context-dependent. Institutional inclusion does not automatically produce symbolic incorporation. Instead, European identity in the WB emerges as a layered, negotiated, and pragmatically filtered construct.

# Conclusion

This study has examined the relationship between European identity, recognition, and integration in the WB through a comparative analysis of Croatia and North Macedonia. By combining a theoretical framework grounded in inclusion–exclusion dynamics with an empirical assessment of public perceptions, it has sought to determine whether institutional integration corresponds to deeper supranational identification.

The findings demonstrate that European integration does not automatically produce a consolidated European identity. In both cases, national attachment remains structurally primary. European identification emerges as layered and conditional rather than transformative. Institutional incorporation modifies political and economic structures, but it does not fundamentally reconfigure established frameworks of belonging.

The comparison further reveals that context matters. In Croatia, EU membership has normalised integration without substantially altering identity hierarchies. In North Macedonia, European identification carries a stronger aspirational and recognition-oriented dimension, reflecting the dynamics

of candidacy and prolonged negotiation. Yet even in this case, national identity retains structural dominance.

The comparative evidence suggests that the integration of the WB into the EU cannot be understood as a linear process of identity convergence. Where institutional incorporation is not accompanied by credible engagement with historical and cultural specificities, the gap between formal membership and societal identification may persist.

In this context, further enlargement, if framed primarily in geopolitical or economic terms, risks reinforcing rather than resolving the tension between institutional inclusion and symbolic belonging. The European identity discourse, instead of being consolidated, may become increasingly contested. The findings of this study therefore support the conditional hypothesis that enlargement without deeper societal anchoring does not automatically strengthen cohesion within the Union.

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# About the Book

This book examines the construction of European identity in the context of EU enlargement, with a focus on Croatia and North Macedonia. Originating from a 2018 Master's thesis, it explores how political integration interacts with identity formation and public perception in the Western Balkans. Carefully revised for publication, it preserves its original insights while engaging with enduring questions of belonging, inclusion, and Europe's evolving boundaries.

# About the author

With an interdisciplinary background, the author approaches Europeanisation and identity from a broad and reflective perspective. This work marks an early yet thoughtful engagement with these themes, offering insight into a wider academic journey shaped by an interest in the forces that continue to define Europe and its margins.