Feels Like Home Again:
The 'Balkanness' of Hungarians from Vojvodina in Hungary

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'Balkan music' is well known in Hungary, as everywhere in Central and Western Europe, but often not as much to those who actually come from the region that produces this style. Many Hungarian students from Vojvodina, Serbia who study in Budapest have either never heard of this music before, or have expressed a negative opinion about it, but upon their arrival to Hungary a lot of them get converted to the 'Balkan ideology': they attend Balkan parties, consume so-called Balkan popular cultural products and identify with a 'Balkan' community.

After a brief discussion of the Vojvodina Hungarians in the context of the discourses of multiculturalism, 'Otherness' and 'Balkanness', this paper explores the process of this conversion and the socio-cultural motives of the old/new identification. The paper argues for the existence of ambiguous identities that can at the same time be strongly Hungarian and obviously Balkan. To understand it, I call for a complex view on ethnic identification taking into account the flexibility and playfulness of cultural identification. The paper looks at identity formation from various angles, from theories of internalizing 'Balkanness' to social stigmatization and social capital. Combining empirical data with post-structural theory, this research aims at explaining the non-exclusivity of Hungarian and Balkan identities of Vojvodina Hungarians living in Hungary more generally it explores the nature of multiple identities

INTRODUCTION: BRINGING HOME THE BALKANS

In the summer of 2007 I was already living back in Serbia when I got an invitation to a Balkan party in Budapest. At the beginning, I found it quite weird to go to Budapest to attend a Balkan party from where I lived, in the heart of the Balkans, but as I had a free ride for a whole day excursion to Budapest, I accepted the invitation considering it as a good opportunity to catch up with friends in the city where I used to live and feel some nostalgia toward my life in this Central European metropolis. My decision was thus purely pragmatic, but I couldn't help wondering how come that, as it turned out, most of my friends I wanted to meet would attend the party. I remembered that during the years I spent in Budapest with them, I was almost the only one who spoke proper Serbian, and definitely the only one who had a gasp of the songs that I suspected would be played at the so-called Yugo party[2] (my underlying motives for being a musical pervert are to be ignored at this point). At the big music event, my surprise could not have been greater seeing my friends partying wildly to the songs of performers like the famous Lepa Brena, the inevitable Bijelo dugme, and even some lesser known folk singers like Nada Topčegić. And to my astonishment, their breaking glasses and dancing on the table was dead serios: not a pinch of irony in it! Maybe their knowledge of Serbian did not expand, but they definitely sang the songs knowing every verse of the lyrics. So what happened to them in the meantime while I was busy getting home to the Balkans? Did they also get there, but on another level? Or did they bring the Balkans to Budapest?

The phenomenon is definitely not unique to my circle of friends. It appears that many young people coming from what is commonly referred to the Balkans re-adopt or adopt the Balkannes in themselves only after they have adapted to a Central or Western European lifestyle. The phrase 'what is commonly referred to the Balkans' is to be emphasized here: what I aim to show in this paper is that in their attitudes and affinities appropriate a lifestyle that mimics the stereotypes of a Balkan way of life imagined by Westerners and presented in the cultural products created by both the 'outsiders' and the 'insiders' of the Balkans, such as Emir/Nemanja Kusturica, Goran Bregović, Nele Karajlić etc. There are plenty of studies that explore how people from the Balkans reappropriate the stereotypes of the region (see Todorova 2006 ; Jezernik 2004; Wolff 2000) in a negative sense; a few of them also look at how the Balkans has come to mean something positive to people who come from the region. However, none of them deal with how 'Balkan lifestyle' is appropriated by individuals not clearly identified as belonging to the Balkans. I aim to present an argument that claims that this lifestyle is both temporary and arbitrary. Temporary in the sense that is freely put on and took off depending on the social context the individual wearing it finds him/herself in, and fully aware of whether the social situation they take part in is appropriate for the 'Balkan card' to be can be played. In this sense, Balkan identity becomes a resource to be acted upon. The Balkan style is arbitrary in the sense that 'feeling Balkan' has no root in the wearers' upbringing, socialization, original cultural patterns of behavior or taste, nonetheless it has become an important part of his/her identity that can be played with, or using a theatrical metaphor: that can be a play to be staged.[3]

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[1]   Everyone, let everyone hear this song that turns the bar on fire, / Everyone, let everyone hear about how to party in the Balkans!

[2]   Parties like this in Budapest are called Balkan parties, Yugo parties or YU parties. In this text I will refer to them as Balkan parties.

[3]   I want to note here that by using the words 'playing' and 'staging' I do not mean that the identity presentation is necessarily something artificial that is shown to be real. On the contrary, as I will argue later in the paper, I emphasize that the identity I am discussing in this research is always already instable and caneasily be played with

After a brief contextualization of the research in terms of geographic and socio-political context and an overview of the methodology, I will turn to exploring the web of identification processes and their underlying drives using theoretical concepts that can be useful in opening the web of meanings of 'Balkannes' in the context of Hungarians from Vojvodina living in their kin state. These concepts come from various fields of study, ranging from the politics of international relations to postcolonial and post-structural theory, however, what they all have in common is that they can explain the complex process by which identity is put on taken off in order to serve particular needs at a particular social context. Using the material of several informal interviews I conducted and media sources found on the Internet[4], underpinned by theoretical concepts such as multiculturalism, Otherness, stigma, mimicry, play, etc., my aim is to draw some conclusions about the inherent instability and potential for playfulness of (at least certain aspects of) identity.

FEELING BALKAN NOW AND THEN

Multiculturalism Vojvodinian way

Vojvodina, the northern province of Serbia, at least nominally autonomous regarding certain economic and policy-making competences, offers an interesting case study for questions of the Balkans, identity, ethnicity, multiculturalism and attitudes towards the Other. Having been described as the textbook example of multiculturalism in postsocialist Europe, it used to be highly heterogeneous in terms of ethnicities even when it was part of Hungarian territory until the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, then during the periods of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and of Yugoslavia, and today when officially more than twenty national minorities live alongside Serbs in Vojvodina; the most numerous being Hungarians, Roma, Romanians, Slovaks, Croats and Ruthenians (Ilić 2001; Göncz and Vörös 2005). Stereotyped narratives of Vojvodina as a multicultural heaven exist (see Korhec 2006; Dević 2002) alongside evidence of strained ethnically framed cleavages (see Bieber and Winterhagen 2006). As a tendency, it can be said that centuries of various ethnic groups living together in Vojvodina have lead to peaceful cohabitation of peoples, recognition and tolerance, but at the same time "hierarchies ethnic, cultural, and linguistic minority and majority groups have appeared as a result of the politics of various elites, and various forms of discrimination disfavoring minorities have emerged" (Göncz and Vörös 2005:188). It is a fact that ojvodina has seen much less explicit conflicts between ethnic groups than for instance Kosovo, the former Serbian province with the same status of an autonomous province within Serbia while it was part of Yugoslavia. However, conflicts alongside ethnic cleavages, latent or explicit, are present despite their underreporting and sweeping under the carpet by various ethno-national elites (not only majority but also minority) with the aim of pertaining the status quo, i.e. while ideologically propagating multicultural policies and practices, what is nurtured is multiculturalism understood merely descriptively: as ethnic pluralism. As few advocates of Vojvodinian multiculturalism see, there is much more to that concept than a situation of cultural heterogeneity where several cultures coexist in a same geographical space; it also means an ideal of political programs that strive for

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– an important feature of identities in general that is often not emphasized in literature that deals with identity formation and presentation especially in the literature on Balkan identities .

[4] Some of the websites where visual material of 'Balkan events' in Budapest and their description can be found are:
http://www.port.hu/pls/fe/festival.festival_page?i_festival_id=8440
http://www.cityweekend.hu/budapest/events/9680/
http://www.cityweekend.hu/budapest/events/7599/
http://www.cityweekend.hu/budapest/events/4641/
http://www.pestiside.hu/20070223/crazed-yugo-party-action-tonight-in-budapest
http://day.hu/esemenyek/10164
http://www.nightinfo.hu/bulik/id12048.ni
http://www.partyzoo.hu/inner.php?page=1&id=9516

achieving a better position of autochthonous or immigrant populations, and a theoretical critical category related to cultural pluralism and interculturalism when speaking about the quality of the relationship between various ethnicities living in the same geographical location (Goldberg 1994; Lukšić-Hacin 1999). To put it bluntly, what I argue is that different ethnic groups live (at best) peacefully *next to each other*, but far from *with each other* as life in Vojvodina is often described. As Bieber and Winterhagen argue, "a pattern of separate lives has become a feature of majority-minority relations in Vojvodina" (2006:1).

Symptomatically, one of the two main Hungarian media in Vojvodina (the internet portal 'Vajdaság ma' [Vojvodina today]) agrees with Merkel and Cameron that the project of liberal multiculturalism has failed, and claims that traditional multiculturalism has a great future in the region.[5] The fact that the two types of multiculturalism and multiculturalism in itself are not defined in the article is telling: the discourse of multiculturalism with an empty meaning has become widespread in the entire region, a floating signifier that can be filled in with ideological content depending on one's own political or personal interests. Under the rhetoric of multiculturalism, ethnic communities lead separate lives and know little about one another.

It is from this ignorance of each other that a peculiar situation arises in which a great number of young people from all minority communities, but especially the most numerous Hungarians (who arguably have the strongest relation with their kin state) decides to pursue higher education and/or look for employment in Hungary. As my interviews show, it is commonly believed that the school curriculum of Serbian as a second language is designed in the way that it is possible to finish secondary school with very little and mainly useless knowledge of Serbian, and Serbian media are rarely followed among those who do not speak the language. Adding to this the often negative attitudes towards the majority ("They are somehow less cultured than we [Hungarians]", as worded by an interviewee)[6], it does not come as a surprise that mainly the capital Budapest, and the southmost city, Szeged, absorbs almost half of those youth that attend an institution of higher education.[7] When asked about the reasons for pursuing education in Hungary informants, apart from a better quality of education and greater scholarship opportunities, state that an important reason for choosing Hungary over Serbia is their poor knowledge of the Serbian language. Living parallel lives naturally leads to unawareness of 'the other' and their culture, be it the national culture and even more its popular cultural products. It is not an overstatement to argue that at the age of 18, when one leaves Serbia to study or work in the environment where one's mother tongue is spoken, he/she departs with a vague knowledge at best about who is Kusturica, ignorance about which songs Crvena jabuka sang and a despise for Ceca, the wife of a warmonger and the other members of the *narodnyák* scene.[8] Here a very important note has to be made, regarding my own position in the research I conducted. It would be naïve to think that the researcher's own position does not affect the course and outcome of the study, especially if the kind of the study is 'anthropology at home'. On the contrary, growing up in Vojvodina as a Hungarian and having studied in Hungary have largely determined my interest for topics dealt with in this research, and my personal experience has greatly influenced every single part of it from my viewpoint to the wording of my questions. I have known some of the people I have talked to about the subject for a long time, to certain extent I had a preconception about their answers even before posing the questions, and I have undoubtedly been familiar with the social context of this study – it can even been said that I have been involved in the scene even if I have rarely attended events that are in the

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[5]   http://www.vajma.info/cikk/karpat/7836/

[6]   This and all other interviews were conducted in Hungarian. Direct and indirect citations are translated from Hungarian to English by the author.

[7]   My personal estimation; there are no data on the issue.

[8]   The hungarianized Serbian word for *narodnjak*, used pejoratively for the so-called newly composed folk music (*novokomponovana narodna muzika*), hereafter NCFM.

focus of this study. Yet, as this paper is mainly theoretical, I do not think it is an obstacle for arriving to some valid conclusions. Admittedly, all this personal involvement can be very 'dangerous' to the research, but there is one potential peril that endangers its validity even more: not being aware of one's bias. All the more since in the fashion of Bourdieu's reflexive sociology, I hold that the biography and behavior of the researcher has to be included in the study because the researcher occupies a place in the social world that is the object of his/her investigation (Bourdieu 2004; Froes 2009) Therefore I did not intend this paragraph to be a mere disclaimer – I have attempted to reflect my on my unavoidably subjective position throughout the entire research and analysis even if not engaging in it constantly on the linguistic level.

Identity and others

History, geography and culture indeed seem to be the key factors of drawing a boundary around ethnic groups: "various ways of defining ethnic groups are found in the literature, but most emphasize cultural and geographical elements" (Sanders 2002:327). Everywhere where two or more ethnicities live next to each other, it is the constructed ethnic boundary between them that separates them, not the cultural content it encloses (Barth 1969). In works dealing with ethnicity it is a generally accepted fact that ethnic groups are differentiated by the boundaries they themselves construct (see Barth 1969; Anderson 1995). Ethnic identification is therefore rather based on the subjective perception of what differentiates one group from the other then on what the groups are objectively like.

It is evident since the postmodern turn that ethnic identity is a social construct. Anderson calls communities imagined as they are based on a mental image of the persons' own ethic affinity (1995). It is not only the social construction of ethnicity that is emphasized though in postmodern theory, but identities and experiences in general are presented as diverse, fluid, hybrid, unstable, a process (see Bhabha 2004; Hall 1992; Sanders 2002). There is underlying assumption that in post-modernity identity formation reflects the postmodern tenets of being fluid, fragmented, and strategic in that individuals may negotiate multiple identities. (Petrunic 2005) "Ethnicity is transformed from something one is into something one does" (Gölz 1998:48).

Yet, among others, it is Bhabha himself who, while ephasizing the hybrid nature of posmodern identity, insists on the fact that "racism, community, blood, and borders haunt the new international and have gained remarkable ideological and affective power" (Bhabha 1998:34). Despite postmodern fluidity, it seems that ethnicity is much more solid that one would expect, even in (or especially so) in contact situations like the one in Vojvodina between Hungarians and Serbs. When speaking about minorities, although acknowledging the possibility for cultural hybrididty, Kymlicka (1995) also highlights the difficulties and rarity of moving between cultures, and argues that the desire of national groups to retain their membership remains strong.

Ethnic identity building, pertaining to real or imaginary geopolitical areas is based on the dialogical relationship with the Other (see Taylor 1992; Lindstrom 2003; Petrunic 2005). Accounting for multinational societies where ethnicity is one of the key factors of identification, the Other is mostly a national other. As in the case of Hungarians from Vojvodina, especially those coming from mono-national villages or towns and who leave for Hungary at the age of 18 or even earlier, there is hardly any contact with the culture of the other nation, their presentation originates from the only available source: (Hungarian) media and popular culture. As it can be seen in the posters advertising Balkan events in Hungary, former Yugoslavs, that is mostly Serbs, are depicted as eccentric Gypsy-looking party animals dancing like crazy to the music of various instruments. Additionally, the difference between Serbs and Gypsies is often blurred: the success of not only Boban and Marko Marković Orkestar in Hungary, but also the more 'urban' Kal band is not accidental – they appeal to the audinace as the prototypes of what is considered Balkan in Hungary, but also in other Central and Western European countries.

Stigma as capital

Coming from a country inhabited by crazy musicians, Gypsies and wild warriors and being culturally identified with them might be amusing at certain times, but at other occasions it definitely stamps the individual with a social stigma. Not only is a Hungarian from Serbia stigmatized in Serbia as being different, under constant threat of being assimilated. Even if all former socialist countries have until now abandoned the idea of violent assimilation and realized that infringement of minority rights leads to conflict more easily than granting some authorities, one should not forget that at some point or other all nominally multicultural states had a goal of inducing a common national culture and language to the entire population (Kymlicka 2007). Also, a Hungarian from Serbia is stigmatized in Hungary as well in terms of public policy especially since Hungary became a member state of the European Union (as interviewees noted, the processes of AIDS and STD medical tests for instance gave them a very strong feeling of being discriminated against and stigmatized.)

In his study on the concept of stigma, Goffman (1990) conceptualizes it as the discrepancy between the virtual (expected) and the actual social identity. In this sense, Vojvodinia Hungarians in Budapest are stigmatized in two ways: First, they are from the Balkans but they do not really act according to the stereotypes of the Balkans, which can be seen as a stigma. The person falls short of several characteristics expected of someone from Serbia, including language, religion, traditions to mentions only the few most important ones, and he/she has to come up with a strategy to compensate for this discrepancy. Goffman differentiates three strategies to manage the stigma: 1. Directly attempt to correct the stigma 2. indirectly attempt to correct the flaws and 3. break with reality – unconventional interpretations of his/her identity. The behavior of young Hungarians from Vojvodina definitely falls into the second category: through what Goffman calls 'tortured learning' they adopt the behavioral patterns of the group they feel they are expected to be like, the 'normals'. Second, what is 'normal' in the context of young people from Vojvodina in Hungary is determined by Hungarian society at large. Normative behavior patterns created by the Hungarian society, distributed by the media and reflected back on the society prescribe not only what is Balkan but also what is 'normal' – in this case who is Hungarian. Therefore all who do not act upon this consensual understanding of what it means to be Hungarian are in a way also stigmatized. Being born in a Balkan country and bearing its citizenship in the eyes of many does not qualify as being a 'real' Hungarian, even if ones speaks the language. In fact, as noted by several interviewees, in the eyes of 'regular' Hungarian citizens, speaking Hungarian proficiently is the only connection Hungarians from Vojvodina have to their kin state. What is more, even the question of language is problematic: stigmatization by Hungarian society seems to become so internalized that nearly all informants rank their knowledge of their mother tongue as 8 or 9 on a scale from 1 to 10 before starting their education in Hungary, and many claim to not speak 'perfect' Hungarian' even now, after several years of living in Budapest. "We definitely speak differently," they claim, and to them, 'different' tends to mean 'imperfect'. Conversely, someone who speaks imperfect Hungarian *is* an imperfect Hungarian. Also, someone who is from the Balakns but does not *act* as being from the Balkans is stigmatized, too. What we see here is an example to a double stigmatization that needs to be mitigated in order to be socially normalized. A natural reaction to a social stigma is to attempt to escape it. However, being from the Balkans can not only motivate individuals to 'run away from this stigma' but also by learning to behave in a certain manner, in the recognizable 'Balkan cliché' way (Kiossev 2002), the stigma can also empower the individual. Being from the Balkans can and is used to present oneself in a more positive light, which is made possible due to the fact that in the eyes of 'Westerners' the Balkan are not only a place of genocide but also of a locus of "stereotypes of violent gloom and reckless extravagance" (Bjelić 2002:15), of perverse pleasures and forbidden desires.

In the classical Marxian sense of the term, 'capital' means both a surplus value and an investment with expected returns in the market. Also, capital is a process rather than a commodity

or a value, and it involves social activities (Lin 2001). To Bourdieu (1982), culture is a system of symbols and meanings. Therefore cultural elements imposed by one group and accepted by the other are symbols, and their interpretation is defined by the dominant group. He defined social capital as: 'the aggregate of actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a "credential"' (ibid: 51). In the case of Hungarians from Vojvodina 'acting Balkan' in Hungary, 'knowing the Balkans', their 'Balkan' behaviour at certain points is seen as collective resource than can be exploited as a means of mitigating at least one part of the social stigma of being neither Balkan nor Hungarian, and also differentiation from 'real' Hungarians.

Mimicking the Other

In his influential work explaining one of the mechanisms of colonial dominance and its subversion, Homi Bhabha (1984) introduced the concept of mimicry. It is a sign of a double articulation, as it at the same time regulates and threatens the regulatory power. By mimicking, the dominated not only imitates the dominant, but also produces an uncertainty of the dominant discourse by its deauthorizing power. It is almost like the dominant one, but not quite. Even though the concept was born out of the postcolonial context, its power to explain the phenomenon when imitation becomes subversion does not stop at the doorstep of post-socialist Europe. What mimicking means in the context of Vojvodinian Hungarian students being Balkan in Hungary is that in their knowledge of Balkan music and their gestures when exhibiting their knowledge are like the knowledge and gestures of what is typically considered as a Balkan way of partying, yet, by the change of the context (not a Balkan *kafana* but a fancy discothèque in Budapest) and the conscious or unconscious play with the Balkan identity, this typical Balkan behavior subverts the stability of having a fixed Balkan identity. There is always a Freudian striking feature, the inappropriate signifier that betrays the non-authenticity (ibid.); in case of Hungarians from Vojvodina it might be the Hungarian language or a Serbian word pronounced in a wrong way that changes the cultural production of meaning – a linguistic feature that differentiates the self from the other. The repetition of Balkannes (instead of representation), or its empty form of imitation, (ibid.) thus becomes dependent upon this incomplete sameness, which presents its interpretation of the Balkans that is in its origin and context very different from the 'authentic' Balkan *kafana* behavior. As for Hungary and the Hungarian understanding of 'being Balkan', it is this version of it that becomes common knowledge about Serbia, the ultimate Balkan as Hungarians know it. And the Balkan as Hungarian know it, as the pictures used in this paper show, inevitably includes elements such as Gypsies (usually depicted in white shirts, unless it is the 'urban' version of Balkan Gypsies that the band Kal represents), trumpets (or occasionally other traditional instruments like accordions), exposure of masculinity (there are hardly any females pictured on posters advertising Balkan parties), a state symbol of some Balkan country (flag, coat of arms, etc. – often unidentifiable and thus impossible to connect to a particular country) and landscape associated with the Balkans (the most obvious being the bridge of Mostar in one of he posters, which also evokes the memory of the wars in the former Yugoslavia, a bottomless treasury of associations of the Balkan craze). These are the images that are created and recreated about the Balkans by foreigners and 'Balkan people' alike.

However, at another level of the analysis one can see that what Hungarian citizens are presented with through the self-presentation of Hungarians from Vojvodina is not the Vojvodinian Hungarian mimicry of the Balkans, but the mimicry of the mimicry of Balkanness. As mentioned earlier, the Vojvodinian Hungarian mimicry is based on what is commonly perceived as Balkan outside the Balkans. This perception is mostly based on mainstream Balkan movies, Balkan music and videos of them. But what are these popular cultural products if not mimicries of the Balkans as well? What are for instance the scenes of Kusturica's films and so many NCFM videos if not exaggerations of what is thought to be a Balkan way of partying? The atmosphere of Kusturica's *Underground*,

everything in it is hyperbolic, overemphasized, enlarged, caricatured (Pavlović 2009:51). The horizons of interpretation are enlarged so that everyone can read into them what they want. But it is exactly this proliferation of meaning that causes the metaphors to begin subverting their own signifiers. Everything is Balkan, and everything is like in the Balkans -- but not quite.

Playing the Other

When signifiers start subverting signified, the system raptures. If the center of a system is deconstructed, there will be no fixed meaning, no stable ultimate consensus on meaning. At this point one is left with two options: either throw out the system as a whole, or start playing with it, i.e. start using parts of the system pragmatically, at one's own liking (Klages 2001). To explain this, Derrida borrows Levi-Strauss's concept of *bricolage*, and defines it as "the necessity of borrowing one's concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined" (Derrida 1993:231). Of course, Derrida himself is a *bricoleur* in this sense, but more importantly, in his theory of post-structuralism he gives room to play, or as he calls it 'freeplay' (1993:224). What I argue in this paper is that playing is exactly what happens at Balkan parties or similar contexts that Vojvodinian Hungarians attend: they play with their identity in the sense that they shift it across the border of 'European' and 'Balkan', act according to stereotypes depending on the context because they find pleasure in it and because they pragmatically find it useful to maximize their interests at that moment. It is important to emphasize here that even though the process is not fully conscious, no Vojvodianian Hungarian would 'act Balkan' if it is not in his/her interest, for instance in official institutions, at work, school etc., even though they claim that 'real' Balkan people behave differently than Hungarians in these contexts – which some informants reported to 'look down on'. As Homi Bhabha gives the example, ethnic categories thought to be stable and unchangeable does not necessarily have to be such: considering the colonial context where identities inevitably influence one another and overlap, the difference between an English gentlemen's club and a bazaar are more ambivalent as one would think (Bhabha 1998). Similarly, a *bricoloeur* Hungarian from Serbia acting Balkan is not necessarily an unconceivable position because Balkan and Hungarian are not necessary a binary opposition. It is possible to have an identity that is both Hungarian and Balkan, that at the same time belongs to both and neither of the two. Ethnic identification can be ironic and serious at the same time: it is possible that people who take their 'Hungariannes' seriously from time to time decide to put their Balkan identity into use – an identity that might be a copy of a copy, a mimicry of a mimicry, but is still a valid identity.

> Names that signal ethnicity (like all other names and like language in general) acquire or fail to acquire significance - casually, ironically, catastrophically - depending on whether or not (and how) people read one another and themselves in terms of such names [. . .] Inversely, inventions of ethnicity can be more cheerfully indulged the less seriously they take themselves (Gölz 1998:50-51).

What this tells us is that there seems to be much more agency for the social actors to create and re-create their points of identification, and that they have a much greater power in the process of identity creation than they are usually imagined to do. Being Balkan is at the same time an identity that is a stigma, a mockery and an emancipatory behavioral pattern – all these at the same time and not contradicting one another.

Playing Balkan – Instead of a conclusion

It has too often been the case that 'Balkanist' discourse, even if it has the aim of deconstructing the construct of the Balkans, fixes both the scholar and his/her subject into a position that, ironically, both the researcher and the 'researched' have tried to escape. Of course, social scientists from the Balkans have been fully aware of this trap, and several of them have called attention to the danger of being enclosed in the Balkan stereotype and the strive for disidentification (see Kiossev 2002,

Bakić-Hayden and Hayden 1992). Especially in the context of studying nationalisms, one has no otheroption than to adopt the concepts and discourse of the field of the study that is being deconstructed (Bakić-Hayden and Hayden 1992).

This cognitive dissonance (ibid.) holds not only for the researcher, but for the subjects of the research as well: being aware of the stereotypes, but living up to them at the same time. Conversely, this living up to the stereotypes set by others is not something the social actors simply find themselves in: individuals have agency in choosing whether and when to adopt the strategy of 'playing Balkan'. They are active objects, not passive subjects of all social situations they take part in, which involves changing identities and free border crossing between Balkan and European.

There is nothing new in assuming this in-betweenness of the Balkans. Starting from Todorava's key metaphor of the bridge (2006), many have conceptualized the Balkans as a liminal zone.

> We are faced with a lot of overlapping cognitive maps and a multitude of possible or actual identities with competing cognitive strategies. In such a context, the acts of individual identification [. . .] take place in an unstable field, where various identity models are in competition; sometimes they even contradict one another, or transform one another. [. . .] Such conditions could create a feeling of uncertainty and anxiety; deprived of orientation, clear models, and stable positions, the individual doesn't know who he or she is. (Kiossev 2002:178).

Yet, as it can be seen from this quote, this state of being in between the East and the West (or the East and the center), or simply of being in a periphery, has mostly been perceived as a constraining and fixed identity. It has mostly been perceived as a traumatic feeling of not belonging to the West and not (wanting to) belonging to the East that one is stuck with. What I have tried to emphasize in this paper is rather the arbitrariness and spontaneity, and the conscious (or unconscious) irony of ethnic identification, as also "such a dynamic context affords individuals more opportunities and more "free space" for maneuvering; it actually enables them to better display their own energy and choice in confronting, or even rejecting, imposed models" (ibid.). This identity is strategic: it can be decided to be used in certain situations and at certain moments and not in others – the actors have the necessary knowledge of the context and a routine of switching identities to decide which moment is suitable for a Balkan identity. In this sense is this self-identification arbitrary and temporal. Similarly to seeing the glass half empty when it can be half full, when discussing Balkan identities, we are often negative in our perception of it as constrain, trauma. Thereby we fail to see the liberating power of the playfulness in being neither here nor there -- or more positively: of being at the same time both here and there.

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