

Dubravka Ugresic

BALKANS, MY BALKANS

*Balkane, Balkane moj,
Budi mi silan i dobro mi stoj.*

(J. Štulić)

1. Images

The old pop song ‘Balkan’ by the Croatian singer Johnny Stulić popped back out of oblivion and now circulates among young ex-Yugoslavs. Why have young people spontaneously resurrected this particular fragment of a past pop culture? Perhaps the lines --- *Balkan, my Balkan/Be mighty and stand strong; and We are Gipsy people, cursed by fate* --- have something to do with this sudden identification. Perhaps these lines express the complicated ex-Yugoslav, Balkan, collective ‘psyche’ better than long-winded elaborations.

The line *Balkan, my Balkan, be mighty and stand strong* has different echoes. One is of that ‘little land on the hilly Balkans’ and the time when Yugoslavs didn’t refuse to be placed in the Balkans. The other echo is of the communist ideology of heroism, with a hidden irony in the phrase *dobro mi stoj*. In the local slang the phrase means simply *take care*, but it also implies a potent male sexuality.

‘Balkan’ – as a set of popular, mostly negative, and amazingly stubborn stereotypes – has a long history. For decades the Balkans proved to be the most favourable West European spot for exercising West European colonial imagination. Ever since Anthony Hope’s popular novel ‘The Prisoner of Zenda’, situated in imaginary Ruritania, the Balkans have served as a projection screen for West European romantic fantasies. The Balkans had everything that Western Europe didn’t have. It was also a territory convenient for lazy colonialism, the kind that didn’t require a long journey, even if it was imaginary.

Many ‘textual colonizers’ (as Vesna Golsvordy so rightly put it) visited imaginary lands somewhere in the Balkans: Ruritania, Carphatia, Kravonia, Silaria, Moesia, Selovnia, Pottibakia, Evarchia, Erewhon, Slaka. Many visited non-existing places with such exotic names as Slavna, Demlin, Mlavia, Danubia, Djakowar. Along their way, these textual colonizers encountered brainless regents and arrogant kings, spies, vagabonds, military idiots, stupid and servile inhabitants of dictatorships, informers, murderers, bloodthirsty dictators, wild people, Draculas and Draculaesque mutants.

At the same time, people from the Balkans rarely travelled to Western Europe. Aleko Konstantinov's literary creation, Bay Ganyo, managed to. But, by denouncing Bay Ganyo as a racist (he was something like a bad collective set of behaviours), Bulgarian postcolonial thinkers got rid of him.

Yes, some would manage to reach even New York, but only as Balkan morphs, as in Jacques Tournier's old film 'Cat People'. A good American guy falls in love with a beautiful Serbian woman who is in the habit of transforming herself into a panther whenever she gets angry. In a moment of desperation, the American guy says: "God, what is with me? I was such a normal, happy guy." Which means: any involvement with Otherness that stems from the Balkans will get one into trouble.

Then communism came to power, and that added new fuel to the fire of West European imagination. Bram Stoker's Dracula has been resurrected in the characters of communist dictators many times. Sometimes characters overlap, as in the latest version of the famous film 'The Prince and the Showgirl'. In the film a simple hairdresser from Queens manages to melt the iron heart of some Romanian or Bulgarian communist dictator.

Malcolm Bradbury's novel 'Rates of Exchange', with its sequel 'Why Come to Slaka?', is probably the last in a long series of Cold War products connected with the Balkans. After the Fall of the Wall, post-Cold-War products appeared, among them films which were (and still are) populated by wild ex-Yugoslav and Ukrainian uranium dealers.

Many great people have left their mark on the imaginary map of the Balkans. Among them were such writers as Lawrence Durrell, Malcolm Bradbury, George Bernard Shaw, E.M. Forster, Agatha Christie, Rebecca West, Saul Bellow, Julian Barnes, and a wide variety of journalists, actors, film directors, political thinkers, and politicians. The imaginary Balkans was modelled and remodelled, shaped and reshaped, constructed and reconstructed. At a time when hundreds of thousands of refugees from former Yugoslavia were landing on West European shores, a new name popped out of the imagination of Goran Stefanovski. From 'Casablanca' and 'Balkan' he coined the word 'Casabalkan'.

The war in former Yugoslavia put the Balkans on the world map once more. A mountain of journalistic, autobiographical, film and literary products have been produced since then. Thanks to the contributions of ex-Yugoslavs, the reality of the Balkans matched its dark image more than ever. Once again the Balkans became a favourite West European hunting ground for strong feelings, thrilling political speculations, moral recuperation, and real political engagement.

The Balkan stigma circulated within the Balkans too, and there nobody wanted to admit any DNA connections. The Slovenians saw themselves as a European protection shield against ‘balkanization’; the Croats thought the same about themselves, and still do; the Serbs didn’t mind shopping in Sofia, Istanbul or Thessalonica, but left ‘the Balkans’ to Bulgarians. Bulgarians didn’t have a way out. They could not move their Balkan mountain any further – over the Black Sea, to Russia, say. After the disappearance of communist leaders with artistic aspirations such projects were no longer possible. So, who lives in the Balkans now? The Bulgarians do.

Stulic’s line *Balkan, my Balkan, be mighty and stand strong*, and its sudden resurrection, could be read as the young’s reconciliation with Balkan identity; as a post-modern acceptance of the image, which is, just like any other image, a matter of fashion. It could also be read as a protest against oppressive nationalistic brainwashing. It was only a few years ago that, during Tudjman’s regime, a strange paragraph prohibiting any future associations between Croatia and the Balkan states was almost added to the Croatian constitution.

The line *We are Gypsy people, cursed by fate*, demonstrates (besides self-pity and a hidden racism) an awareness that Roma people, badly discriminated by Croats, Serbs, Albanians, Romanians, Bulgarians and others, are, in fact, the most stigmatized ethnic population in Europe. Employing a strategy of self-stigmatization, combined with unavoidable self-pity, the line is a quick and sharp response to the Balkan stigma, as well as being highly commercial. Many of the cultural products coming from the Balkans – films (by Emir Kusturica, Goran Paskaljevic, and others), plays and pop-music – use this ambivalent strategy. In other words, if the whole world sees us, “Gypsy people”, as primitive and wild people, we’re going to play that part. And the world takes it as truth.

2. Hard Work

A lot of work has to be done in order to establish cultural cooperation within Europe. The Balkan people, ex-Yugoslavs above all, have a tough job ahead of them re-thinking, re-evaluating and articulating their recent past and their involvement in recent events. In other words, the people of the Balkans have some real “soul-searching” to do. They will have to deconstruct the familiar patterns of self-stigmatization, self-pity and discrimination, or denial that “there is something wrong”, as well as an arrogance that is based on the shaky foundations of national identity or the “otherness”- pride .

West Europeans are expected to do the same. Over the last few years Europe has undergone a rapid transition, marked by such important events as the Fall of the Wall,

the unification of Germany and the introduction of a common currency. Europe is also expanding and will continue to do so in the future. But, above all, Europe is experiencing a demographic change. Today's Europe is, more than ever before (demographers claim that there is no comparison in history), populated by non-European immigrants. The human landscape of Europe has changed radically over the last thirty or so years. Therefore West Europeans should re-evaluate the ideological set of ideas that has upheld their West European pride, such as democracy, human rights, tolerance and so forth.

One of Europe's ideological 'darlings' is multiculturalism. However, this idea of multiculturalism is, in practice, nothing more than shopping for vegetables at the Turkish shop and having dinner in an Indonesian restaurant. Ethnic and racial incidents are rife and part of everyday life in Europe. Using a definition of contemporary society as a 'risk society characterized by global reflexivity' Slavoj Žižek concludes that 'racism itself is becoming reflexive'. "Today's reflexive racism is paradoxically able to articulate itself in terms of direct respect for the other's culture," according to Žižek. European multiculturalism is, as practised today, more than ever just a politically correct disguise for indifference, for lack of contact between different ethnic groups, for politically acceptable racism.

In such a complex context it is not easy to reflect upon cultural cooperation in Europe. There are many questions to be asked and answered before we undertake such an ambitious enterprise: for instance, how we see and define culture. In cultural cooperation – which is today commonly understood as an exchange of cultural products – I see three major scenarios bearing major dangers.

The first possible scenario is the already existing one, based on the idea of European multiculturalism. It is a 'Eurovision song contest' scenario. This major European mass-cultural performance, which emotionally involves millions of European TV viewers, is the most explicit and vulgar metaphor of European cultural cooperation. This year's winner, a Turkish pop group, is a perfect mass cultural product of European multicultural ideology. The judges' choice reinforces the stereotype (semi-belly-dance, semi-oriental music), breaks with it (blond Turkish daughters born in Switzerland), simultaneously expresses and frees itself of 'national identity'. With this example in mind, we can easily imagine a European poetry, art or theatre festival based on the same idea of culture and cultural cooperation.

The second possible scenario of cultural cooperation in Europe is one based on defending high European cultural standards, meant to be a defence against the American mass culture that dominates the European market. There were some attempts to protect European cultural products against American 'cultural imperialism'. There is, however, another imaginary 'threat' – one that comes from the inside, from non-European

Europeans. The West European cultural canon, having dominated for centuries, no longer plays a major role in today's global culture. A cultural policy based on a fear of 'Islamization' from within and 'Americanization' from without could produce a scenario based on exclusion, in which Europe's culture would define itself as the 'defender' or 'museum curator' of the highest 'European' cultural values.

The third danger is hidden in the term 'advocacy for culture'. Cultural policy experts, cultural operators, cultural managers, cultural facility providers might in some near future outnumber writers, artists, film-makers, composers. If such a scenario came about, then cultural cooperation in Europe would simply mean cultural cooperation between cultural policy makers. The idea of culture as a service would prevail. Culture would serve the idea of unification, of a united Europe; it could serve as an ambassador, a diplomat, an escort service. In that case, culture would falsely transform itself in order to become a most pleasant representative of the national state, to keep the status quo in other words.

And then there is the market and overproduction. As Jean Baudrillard said: "Art died not because there was not any, but because there was too much."

3. Test & Toast

Cultural dynamics – constant and lively exchanges – happen on their own, mostly without much reflection. Ideas, influences, interactions happen indirectly, incidentally and often by mistake. It's difficult to control these dynamics, to follow their paths, and to understand them easily.

The real 'language of culture' today could be called *smurfentaal*. That's what young urban people in Netherlands call their slang, which is peppered with Moroccan, Turkish, Antillean words and English words, and lots of gestures. The name *smurfentaal* derives from popular culture (Smurfs are little blue cartoon people). In other words, the language of culture is a mixture of many cultural languages and is constantly in change. It is a language influenced by global culture and spoken globally; a language of a constant inclusion, and not exclusion.

Great works of art also happen on their own. More often than not their authors are not representatives of national cultures, but the opposite: outsiders, rebels, exiles, lonely individuals. James Joyce, an Irish rebel, abandoned Ireland, his home, his church, the existing values and norms, the norms of language and of literary tradition. He linked himself to the Homeric story, creating the biggest literary monument of European modernism with his novel *Ulysses*.

Let us try to imagine Mr. Joyce today. He would need seven years to complete *Ulysses*, and seventeen years not to complete *Finnegan's Wake*. At the moment, Mr. Joyce is in Trieste, he is poor and unknown, he is going to teach English language in the Croatian town of Pula, just for a few months. Later he will move to Paris.

Here I will give you some homework. Imagine Nora telling James: "We are so poor, Jimmy, you should apply for some grant with some of those projects of yours!" Would today's wealth of cultural institutions and cultural facilities be able to help Mr. Joyce? Would our cultural managers be able to recognize his genius? Or would they, following the rules, advise Mr. Joyce to seek a stipend from some Irish cultural institution? Or would they advise him to try some Greek cultural foundation, concerning that 'Greek link' of his project? Perhaps the answers to these questions will help a bit in building a vision for a new European cultural policy.

My message is simple, as are my fears. 'Workers', 'cultural proletarians' should not serve to facilitate cultural institutions, but cultural institutions should serve to facilitate 'cultural proletarians'.

As I am supposed to open this seminar, let me go back and use a quote from Malcolm Bradbury for this purpose. These words in broken English belong to Comrade-General I. Vulcani, head of the Slakan State:

In Slaka, when we drink, we like to make toast. Our favourite toast is 'to dialogi'. With 'dialogi' we mean many things. 'Dialogi' is the friendship of all peace-loving fraternal peoples. 'Dialogi' is the great spirit of amity and concord. 'Dialogi' means desire for true intercourse - an intercourse where each partner is an equal and no-one is on top.