

WESTERN BALKANS

AN OLD GEOGRAPHICAL REFERENCE (RE)VITALIZED

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the emergence and evolution of the concept of the “Western Balkans”, aiming to clarify the conceptual and geographical differences between the terms “Balkans” and “Western Balkans”, as well as to highlight current perspectives on the region’s accession to the European Union. The paper also seeks to discuss the historical accuracy regarding this phrase by identifying its earliest documented attestations. The methodological approach combines the etymological analysis of the term “Balkan” in Turkish and Bulgarian with a systematic investigation of primary sources written in English and French.

The results show that the expression “Western Balkans” first appeared in documents from the first half on the 19th century with a strictly geographical meaning, later gaining political and military connotations starting with the war of 1877. The official recognition of the term in European Union documents occurred only in 1998, referring to a group of six entities – the states of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and the province of Kosovo – distinct from other Balkan or Southeast European countries that made more rapid progress toward European integration.

The term “Western Balkans” represents a compromise formula developed to meet contemporary political-administrative requirements, both at the regional level and within European policies. At the same time, the study aims to serve as a methodological research model for students, offering an example of rigorous analysis from both historical and conceptual perspectives.

Keywords: Western Balkans, European Union, Balkan Peninsula, European policies.

As a multinational and multicultural area, often metaphorically referred to as the "Jerusalem" of the European continent, the Balkans is perhaps one of the most geographically sensitive areas in Europe. Throughout history, the Balkan peoples have searched for their identities, as well as to secure a recognised position within the constellation of regional and global powers. This pursuit has frequently been accompanied by tensions and conflict. As a result, there has never been long-term peace across the peninsula, and the area has recurrently been characterized as a "powder keg", reflecting the persistence of unresolved historical grievances.

The area has been, since ancient times, a site of conflict between great empires and diverse peoples, with armed clashes occurring frequently: beginning with the Byzantine-Bulgarian Wars (VII-XIV) between the Byzantine Empire and the Bulgarian Empire, the battles against the Ottoman Empire (XIV-XIX centuries), the Serbian Revolution (1804-1835), the Greek War of Independence (1821-1829), and the Romanian War of Independence (1877-1878), culminating in the Russo-Romanian victory and formalized by the Preliminary Treaty of San Stefano (1878) and the Treaty of Berlin (1878), the Balkan Wars (1912-1913), which resulted in the reconfiguration of borders in the Balkan Peninsula and the significant weakening of the Ottoman Empire in Europe, and the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001), which concluded with the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

As for the Second Balkan War¹, it involved fighting between former allies in the Balkan League, which had conquered Ottoman territories such as Macedonia, Albania, and much of Thrace. The cause of these armed conflicts seems to be related to the leftist emergence of nation-states in the context of ethnic conglomeration inherited from the previous administrative divisions of the Ottoman Empire. A few years later, during the First World War (1914-1918), the states of the Balkan Peninsula were part of different political-military camps², once again waging war against each other.

¹ The Second Balkan War (June-July 1913) was fought between the Kingdom of Bulgaria and the Kingdoms of Greece, Serbia, and Montenegro, as well as Romania and the Ottoman Empire.

² The Kingdom of Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire entered the war alongside the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires to form the Central Powers, while the Kingdom of Greece, the Kingdom of Serbia, the Kingdom of Montenegro, and the Kingdom of Romania aligned with the Entente Powers (where the main allies were France, the Russian Empire, the British Empire, the Kingdom of Italy, and the United States of America).

³ Our systematic analysis has led to this conclusion, but we do not exclude a possible refutation based on further research on the topic.

⁴ Based on experience and pragmatism, the European Union is much more interested in creating "regional approaches" (a striking example being the three Baltic States, which share common elements due to their geographical proximity) than in advocating distinct policies with each candidate country individually. However, in the enlargement process, accession negotiations are conducted on an individual basis with each state, according to its own progress. Comprising six nations, this group of countries should be referred to in European documents and reports as "the six Western Balkan countries" or "the six countries of the Western Balkans". However, it is much easier to identify this group by the generic term "Western Balkans" or "Western Balkan Six" (WB6). Thus, after the possible integration of any of the six countries, the phrase will not require updating; it will remain (almost) unchanged as "Western Balkans" or "Western Balkan Five" (WB5) and so on.

⁵ Both the Serbian state and five EU member states (Romania, Spain, Slovakia, Cyprus, Greece) do not recognize Kosovo's independence.

Given the complexity of the socio-cultural and ethnic systems of the Balkans throughout history, the main purpose of this paper is to present the emergence and evolution of the concept of the Western Balkans, understand the conceptual and geographical differences between the Balkans and the Western Balkans, and record the prospects for the integration of the region into the European Union of the states currently included in this generic designation.

Therefore, our approach aims to discuss and bring to the forefront the historical accuracy of the term *Western Balkans*, including by identifying³ the oldest attestation of this name.

The Western Balkans have long been a focal point of scholarly interest largely due to their enduring instability and frequent depiction as a volatile, structurally unbalanced and inherently conflict-prone region. Although some progress has been made since the late 1990s, the Western Balkans continue to fall short of achieving lasting regional stability. Initially affected by the dissolution of the Yugoslav state (which served for decades as a "protective umbrella") and armed conflicts, and later by the process of state-building, the region is currently marked by the persistence of potentially conflict-generating tensions. The pertinent question is: Which is the identity and what are the geographical boundaries of the Western Balkans?

For more than a quarter of a century, therefore, from the perspective of European policies, the *Western Balkans* have been a group of countries on the western edge of the Balkan Peninsula along the Adriatic coast, including⁴: the Republic of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, the province of Kosovo⁵, the Republic of North Macedonia, and the Republic of Serbia. These are the countries of the former Yugoslavia (excluding Croatia and Slovenia), with Albania also included.

As can be seen, the term *Western Balkans* has been frequently used in public discourse over the last quarter of a century. In this respect, it is remarkable that the intention of European officials is to define this region

by a concept that does not include the name of the old continent at all. In this way, the EU and its Member States effectively impose a terminological distinction upon the non-integrated segment of the European continent. Most authors who have researched the subject over the last quarter of a century start from the assumption that the term was first officially used⁶ during the Vienna European Council summit held on December 11-12, 1998, as a means of designating a group of countries that the European authorities sought to differentiate from other Balkan or South-Eastern European countries - such as Romania, Bulgaria and Slovenia, which had achieved much faster progress towards EU integration, as well as from Greece, an EU member since 1981. Croatia was also initially included within the scope of the Western Balkan designation, but this classification ceased following its accession to the EU on July 1, 2013 (Lika, 2022).

Currently, this designation specifically refers to six entities located in close geographical proximity and marked by intricate interethnic dynamics: the Republic of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, , the Republic of North Macedonia, the Republic of Serbia, and the province of Kosovo (Lika, 2022). In 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted EU candidate country status, and a year later, accession negotiations were formally initiated. Montenegro received candidate status in 2012, with accession negotiations beginning in 2014. North Macedonia, like Albania, has held candidate status since 2014, and the EU formally opened accession negotiations in 2022. Serbia was granted candidate status in March 2012, following an agreement between Belgrade and Pristina on the regional representation of Kosovo, with accession negotiations commencing in 2014.

The adoption - in fact *the (re)vitalization* - of the term *Western Balkans*, used predominantly by EU

officials to designate the future candidate countries in this region, has also generated some confusion, as it aims at a strong geopolitical delimitation based on state borders. Thus, there are voices arguing that it was introduced more to exclude than to include the region, and that it will disappear when the region becomes Europeanized and joins the EU. One of these voices is that of Lika Liridon, a researcher at the Centre for Studies in International Relations (CEFIR) of the University of Liège, who believes that the term was designed and institutionalized to designate more precisely the countries included in the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) . The EU classifies the acceding countries as members and those outside the EU bloc as "others", while the *Western Balkans* designates countries on the path of harmonization with the norms and standards imposed by the EU. Pointing out that *Europeanization* is a concept opposed to *Balkanization*⁸ , the author states that in the EU's political discourse, the countries of the Western Balkans will not be able to become EU members until they are Europeanized. Excluding the consistently positive statements by senior European officials, it seems that the EU is not yet fully prepared to expand⁹ rapidly in the Western Balkans. In her opinion, the EU uses the *Western Balkans* concept in a strategic and geopolitical way that leads to exclusion rather than inclusion (Liridon, 2023).

On the other hand, some studies argue that the Western Balkans is an appropriate name for a regional security subcomplex with certain specific characteristics, as part of the European regional security complex (Djukić & Obradović, 2020). In contemporary international relations and in several official EU documents, it is broadly recognised that the Western Balkans regional security subcomplex encompasses all the countries that emerged from the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia -

⁶ In the Vienna European Council Conclusions, the term **Western Balkans** was used four times (including a separate section called **WESTERN BALKANS** in Chapter **XIII. External Issues**), as follows: "74. The European Council invites the Council [of the European Union], in line with the recommendations in its report, to develop common strategies for Russia, Ukraine, and the Mediterranean region, particularly considering the Barcelona Process, the Middle East Peace Process, and the Western Balkans, understanding that the first common strategy will be targeted at Russia. When establishing additional topics for joint strategies, thematic subjects should also be considered. [...] 101. The European Council recalls the importance that the European Union attaches to the political and economic development of all the countries in South East Europe and to the stability and prosperity of the region as a whole. The EU is significantly contributing to these objectives through, on one hand, the enlargement process in which some of the concerned countries participate, and on the other hand, through a regional approach involving countries of the Western Balkans. The European Council expressed its determination to achieve these objectives" (Consilium, 1998).

⁷ Launched in June 1999, the Stabilisation and Association Process for countries of South-Eastern Europe (SAP) is the European Union's primary instrument for supporting the Western Balkan countries on their European path. Through a progressive partnership based on reforms, SAP fosters regional stability, economic transition, and alignment with EU standards. Regular dialogues and dedicated financial instruments aid in implementing the reforms necessary for accession (EEAS, n.d.).

⁸ The term 'balkanization' refers to the process of dividing an area, country, or region into several small but hostile units. It was first used by the New York Times after the First World War to indicate the break-up of the Habsburg Empire into small, antagonistic states. The name derives from the region that demarcates the southeastern part of Europe, the Balkan Peninsula (Davidova, 2016). According to renowned specialist Maria Todorova, "balkanization" not only began to mean the parceling out of large and stable political units but also became synonymous with a return to the tribal, backward, primitive, barbaric (Todorova, 2015).

⁹ In addition to the negative impact of the difficult Kosovo recognition process, the issues of ethnic conflicts and high levels of corruption, the period since 2020 the COVID-19 crisis, economic shortcomings, and the ongoing crisis in Ukraine (triggered in February 2022), all contributing to a shift in perspective towards integration from "Euroenthusiasm" to "Euroskepticism."

excluding Slovenia and Croatia - alongside the Republic of Albania (Djukić & Obradović, 2020).

These are the states initially included in the Stabilisation and Association Process; in other words, a non-integrated core, which is a basic characteristic of this region and relevant for the EU. While the six Balkan states constitute the essence of this region, the main international actors are considered to be the EU, the US, Russia, China, and the Republic of Türkiye. We should not forget NATO either, which has played a pivotal role in the armed conflicts that have affected the region since the 1990s, or the fact that almost all Western Balkan countries are members of this Alliance, except for Serbia, which has opted for military neutrality, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is not (yet) a full member. The predominant factor, however, is the EU, which has assumed the role of stabilizer in the Western Balkans since the 2000s and is the main goal for the future progress of the Western Balkan states, primarily in terms of joining the European Community bloc.

We have reported the accepted assumption that the term Western Balkans was first used in an official document in December 1998 by the European authorities, although at least three specialists mention in their studies the year 1996 itself¹⁰, without actually indicating any official EU document. In what follows, we will show that this concept has a much older origin in historical writings, but it was used in a geographical rather than political sense to geographically delimit the Western Balkan region.

The term *Balkans* is commonly used to describe the region of South-Eastern Europe, or at least a part of it; however, upon closer examination, there is no clear-cut demarcation. Historically, the term Balkans was first used to refer to the Stara Planina Mountains in Bulgaria, but over time, the name has come to encompass a much wider geographical area, often referred to in the literature as the Balkan Peninsula. As for the etymology of the word Balkan, there is no unitary interpretation—it seems to derive from the Persian word *balk*, to which the Turkish suffix *-an* was added (Bačan, 2021). The term Balkan derives from the Turkish word *balkan*, meaning mountain. It first appeared in the 14th century in reference to the mountainous region of the Balkan Peninsula, which was thus separated from the rest of Europe (Velibor, 2013).

It is clear that the etymology is of Turkish origin, but the Turkish word *balkan* has two meanings: 1. *bataklık*, meaning *swamp*; 2. *yüksek dağ*, meaning *high mountain*. Therefore, the name of the peninsula in south-eastern Europe comes from the Turkish version of the Great Balkan Mountain in central Bulgaria. However, in many Anatolian dialects, the word *Balkan* is used in the sense of *swamp* rather than *mountain* (< *batilgan*). In Hungarian, *Balkány* also means *swamp* and is probably a borrowed word from Turkish (Nişanyan, 2018). In modern Turkish, *Balkan* means a forested *mountain range*. If we refer to the Balkans as a geographical region, in Turkish, we would have the form *Balkanlar* (where the suffix *-lar* indicates the plural), which would literally translate as the *Balkans*.

During recent tourist travels in Bulgaria, I have noted a local guide's report that the word *Balkan* is derived from the Turkish words *bal* (honey) and *kan* (blood). The hypothesis is based on a work on Bulgarian history, which does not seem to be accessible to the public. However, the interpretation is not correct, according to Prof. Dr. Darko Tanasković, a specialist in oriental studies and former Serbian ambassador to the Republic of Türkiye, who denies any scientific link between the two Turkish words and the place name *Balkan*. According to him, the Balkan Peninsula toponym derives from the Balkan Mountains, known as Stara Planina by Serbs and Bulgarians, a mountain massif that runs through central Bulgaria and eastern Serbia. Other theories hold that the place name *Balkan* derives from the Turkish word *balkan*, meaning *forested mountain*. The name, therefore, dates back to the period of Turkish occupation, as there are no earlier historical sources to prove it. According to another theory, the name originates from the 7th century, when the whole area was under the First Bulgarian Empire¹¹, the word *balkan* in Bulgarian means *mountain* (info-ks.net, 2016).

Regarding the naming and delimitation of the Balkan Peninsula, it is worth recalling that in 1808, when the German geographer Johann August Zeune realized that the area between the Black Sea, the Sea of Marmara, the Aegean Sea, the Ionian Sea, and the Adriatic Sea was shaped like a peninsula, he named it after the longest mountain range, namely the Balkans, because they seemed to form a natural boundary. He was the first to use the term peninsula, based on the erroneous idea that the Stara Planina or Balkan mountain range stretches

from the Black Sea to the Adriatic Sea (Todorova, 2015).

As numerous sources attest, the three borders of the Balkan Peninsula are undisputed: the Adriatic Sea to the west, the Black Sea to the east, and the southern tip of the Peloponnese (bounded by the Ionian and Aegean Seas). The determination of the northern boundary is a controversial subject, as a peninsula must have a shorter land border than a sea border. If the Trieste-Odessa line is considered the northern boundary, then it is worth noting that it is longer than the Trieste-Peloponnese line, making it difficult to clearly delineate the peninsula's limits. Scientific progress has revealed that Stara Planina is not the largest mountain range, nor does it dominate south-eastern Europe, necessitating a correction of this inaccurate designation.

It appears, however, that the earliest mention of the name appears on an early 14th-century Arabic map, which refers to the Haemus Mountains¹² as the Balkans (Dobrev, 1989). The first attested use of the name *Balkans* in the West in reference to a mountain range in Bulgaria was in a letter sent to Pope Innocent VIII in 1490 by the Italian humanist Callimaco Buonacorsi. The Ottomans first mentioned it in a document from 1565 (Todorova, 2015).

Research has led to the first mention of the phrase “Western Balkans” in the monthly magazine *The Foreign Quarterly Review* as early as 1834¹³, in reference to M.E.M. Cousinéry's 1831 work *Voyage dans la Macédoine: contenant des recherches sur l'histoire, la géographie et les antiquités de ce pays* (in two volumes). In this context, the term was used to designate an area used mainly for tourist, commercial, or military purposes, delimiting the existence of *provinces-countries* situated between the Adriatic Sea, the Sava River, the core Balkans, and the Aegean Sea. It should be noted that at that time, the region was under-explored and predominantly perceived as a territory of purely

geographical relevance (FQR, 1834).

Then, only a decade later, areas of the Western Balkans, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, were haunted by so-called "haiduci", but also by a number of groups who, sheltered in dense forests, attacked and robbed groups of travelers. The area was therefore a place to be avoided (TEM, 1845). Four decades later, around 1886, the wooded gorges of the Western Balkans were seen as hiding surprises of all kinds, but also as a natural defense of the peoples who had survived in those territories (The Dublin Review, 1886). Once again, it should be noted that no states are identified, only a geographical area, with the result that no major administrative-political entities have yet coagulated in the region.

In 1897, H.C. Thomson's travel diary, *The Outgoing Turk, Impressions of a Journey through the Western Balkans*, with 76 photographs and 3 maps, in which the author makes a more detailed analysis, but does not go beyond the geographical area¹⁴, or rather does not make an association between the countries in the area. The author relates how he traveled in the summer of 1895 through Bosnia and Herzegovina by carriage and post carriage, more than 1300 kilometers, not along the main traffic arteries, but through the mountainous outlying districts, rarely trampled by human feet and situated far from the railroad. The people were unarmed, but thanks to the excellent gendarmerie system, there was a state of calm throughout the country, and travelers felt safe. The villagers were poor and backward, to be expected after centuries of Ottoman oppression. Thomson confesses to using the phrase through the Western Balkans to describe his journey (Thompson, 1897).

And yet 1910 is the year in which the phrase "countries of the Western Balkans" appears explicitly¹⁵ in Frances Kinsley Hutchinson's *Motoring in the Balkans*. The route included Trieste, crossed Dalmatia, touching Montenegro and other countries in the Western Balkans.

¹² DHAEMUS or AEMUS (ὁ Αἷμος, τὸ Αἷμον ὄρος, or Αἷμος; Balkans) refers to an extensive mountain range situated in northern Thrace extending - according to its broadest classical definition - from the Adriatic Sea in the west to the Black Sea in the east. Generally, ancient authors use the name Haemus (corresponding to the present-day Balkan Mountains) to refer to the central section of this range, particularly the portion stretching from Mount Scamius in the west to the shores of the Pontus Euxinus, between the ancient cities of Naulochus and Mesembria (DGRG, 1854).

¹³ T"European Turkey is as yet but very imperfectly known. The northeastern provinces, between Constantinople and the Danube, have been lately visited by various travellers, as well as by the Russian armies; but there is still a dense mass of country between the Adriatic, the river Save, the **Western Balkan**, and the Aegean Sea, and extending from the 40th to the 45th degrees of north latitude, which is yet almost wholly unexplored by foreigners. Bosnia, Turkish Croatia, and Hertzegovina, Northern Albania, Western Roumelia, and Macedonia, - these are provinces equal to kingdoms, intersected by mountains, forests, and rivers, inhabited by numerous and fierce populations, mostly of Slavonian or Illyrian races. The Slavonian subjects or tributaries of the Porte, including the Servians, cannot be estimated at less than five millions, the Albanians at another million and a half." (FQR, 1834, p.445)

¹⁴ "I have used the expression, "through the **Western Balkans**," to describe my journey, because the people, alike in Bosnia, in the Hercegovina, in Dalmatia and in Montenegro, call their hills, not as we do on our maps, the Junian, Illyrian or Dinaric Alps, but simply, "The Balkans," the Turkish word for forest-covered mountains." (Thomson, 1897, pp. X-XI)

¹⁵ "We look at each other with the keen appreciation of kindred souls in a reminiscent mood. Each fascinating scene, each happy day has a special corner in our memories, and with the utmost satisfaction we recall the interesting experiences, the wonderful scenery, the picturesque people which have made this motor trip in the western Balkans over the highways of Dalmatia and Montenegro, the Herzegovina, and Bosnia one continuous delight." (Hutchinson, 1910, p.326)

The book includes a range of tourist information as well as a guidebook with numerous photographs (about 100) (Hutchinson, 1910).

Later, in a relatively short period of time (1915-1916), references to the countries of the Western Balkans emphasize a period of profound instability in the context of the influence exerted by the dual Austro-Hungarian monarchy on the one hand and the continuing decline of the Ottoman Empire on the other (Munroe, 1915; The Statesman, 1915).

As far as French-language publications are concerned, the first references to the Western Balkans - in French, *Balkans occidentaux* - date at least from July 1877, in a geographical sense, referring to military and social events in the wake of the Russo-Turkish War, 1877-1878. Thus, in the article entitled *La Bulgarie et les Bulgares*, published in the Parisian journal *Études religieuses, historiques et littéraires*, the landforms of Bulgaria - part of the Western Balkans¹⁶ (in text: *Balkans occidentaux*) - are described as natural barriers against possible foreign invasions, but also as land communication routes:

It passes along a major road whose strategic importance is emphasized by the current war. It joins the valley of the Nichava, with the fortified city Nich (Niassus of the Romans) as its capital, and the Sofia basin to the Danube, passing through Orhanieh, Plevna, Nicopoli, and sending from Plevna a branch to Roustchouk via Biela on the Yantra. Finally the Gintsi Pass (1508 meters), in the Berkovitsa Balkan, and the Saint Nicholas Pass (Sveti Nikola, 1385 meters), near the Serbian border, give way to two other very important routes, also very important for strategy and trade. These are those which link the strongholds and trading posts of Vidin and Lom-Palanka, on the Danube, on the one hand with Sofia and the interior of Turkey, on the other Pirot (or Charkoi), center of Bulgarian industry in the south of the western Balkans and with Nich which watches over the Morava valley, natural gate of Serbia. (ÉRHL, 1877, p. 659)

The term Western Balkans is referenced in a journal

of political debates concerning the Russo-Romanian-Turkish war of 1877 (in the text: *Balkans occidentaux*) indicating the expression was in use within the geopolitical discourse as early as the late 19th century:

The most sensitive blows hit them alternately in Europe and Asia. Chefket Pasha was defeated on the road from Orchania to Plevna, Ismail-Hakki Pasha capitulated at Telliche, the investment of Plevna has become a fait accompli, almost all of western Bulgaria has been invaded by Russian cavalry, and the western Blakans are already threatened.¹⁷ (JDPL, 1877, p. 1)

The same text also appeared in the same year's edition of *Le Patriote Albigeois*. At the same time, in *Le Courrier de la Lozère*, we are informed that Mehmet Ali Pasha is assembling his armies of support behind the Western Balkan line. A number of other publications repeat the same information, including *Le pays, L'ami du peuple, Le Courrier du Pas-de-Calais, Guerre d'Orient 1877-1878. Le Gaulois*, in 1882, reported that unrest had swept through all the districts of the Western Balkans, and that the task of the government in Vienna to restore order in a Turkish province was not an easy one (Le Gaulois, 1882; Dépêches, 1882; Dépêches de la nuit, 1882). Menotti Garibaldi's nomination of Menotti Garibaldi for the life presidency of the Confederation of the Western Balkans (in the text: La Confédération des Balkans occidentaux) (L'intransigeant, 1882) is also worth mentioning here.

In a history textbook from 1891, Professor Maurice Dunan tells of the military campaigns waged by Emperor Marcus Aurelius Claudius Gothicus, known as Claudius II, in Dalmatia against the Goths, culminating in the victory at Naissus (present-day Nissus, Serbia), the final battle being fought in the Morava Valley, a pass in the Western Balkans (in text: *Balkans occidentaux*) (Dunan, 1891). From *La Revue d'Orient et de Hongrie*, 1902 edition, we learn about the enthronement of the Serbian Archbishop, H.E. Firmilien, in Skopje, and the fact that the city became a center of Bulgarian identity in the Western Balkans (in text: *Balkans occidentaux*).

Of much more recent date, a revealing mention of the term *Western Balkans* was in 1892 in the *Meyers Neuer Handatlas* of the Mannheim Institut Mannheim in Germany. The German researchers precisely delineated the Balkan region into three distinct areas: the Eastern Balkans (located east of the Carpathians), the Western Balkans (the Dinarides area), and the Central Balkans (which included the territories of Serbia, Northern Macedonia, and Greece) (Meyer, 1892).

The press in 1908 brings news of the Austro-Hungarian Empire's Balkan policy to maintain peace in the Western *Balkans* (*Le Matin*, 1908), as well as the construction of a railway linking Bosnia and Macedonia, areas considered to have a wild terrain and an insubordinate population that will learn obedience with the passing of the type and the benefits of civilization (Chlumecky, 1908).

Let us not forget that in the 1990s, the term *Balkans* had a negative connotation, often associated with bloody ethno-religious ethnic conflict, political instability, and fragmentation. At that time, it was unthinkable that the Balkans would move towards membership of the EU, an entity of the highly developed countries. European political leaders were aware that they had to take into account and harmonize public opinion in both the EU member states and the Balkan states, so a new concept with positive nuances was created: *the Western Balkans* (Milardović, 2009). For European citizens and politicians at that time, this concept indicated an area that was aimed only at the traditional Balkans, that part of the region that aspired to the developed West. At the same time, for the Balkan states, the term had a similar perception, illustrating a kind of Western ideal in the process of materializing, and in the name of which integration efforts would be made. Thus, the *Balkanization* of Europe was avoided, and *the Europeanization* of the Balkans was achieved.

Furthermore, Milardović (2009) argues that the Western Balkans are a social construct because they do not exist as such on any map or in any geographical

atlas; they are therefore a construct derived from Western politics.

Thus, in 1995, the EU adopted Agenda 2000¹⁸, which set out the enlargement process as a comprehensive and evolutionary process of integration, to be carried out in stages, at a pace tailored to each candidate country according to its degree of preparedness. It was to be applied in a unified way to six candidate countries¹⁹ in Central and Eastern Europe (CEEC), which did not include any of the former Yugoslav states²⁰. There are opinions that some of the six eligible countries were less developed than the former Yugoslav federation or, in other words, the region generically referred to as the *Balkans* (Milardović, 2000). Subsequently, based on the recommendations of the European Commission in December 1997, the Luxembourg European Council decided to launch a 'general enlargement process' for all countries wishing to join the EU. The Union began to consider²¹ the fate of the newly formed Balkan states and adopted the *Regional Approach Policy for the Western Balkan states* (Consilium, 1998).

Thus, 27 years after its first appearance, the term *Western Balkans* has become the backbone of the EU's policy towards the countries it is intensively supporting to eventually integrate. An important role in the geographical definition of the region was played by the document entitled *A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*, which clearly defines the countries belonging to the Western Balkans (Slukan Alkić, 2009). According to Milardović (2000), this event marked the transition of the concept from a predominantly virtual-political one to a clearly geographically defined notion. Slovenia acceded to the EU on May 1, 2004, and seemingly definitively abandoned any association with the term Balkans in the context of European integration. On July 1, 2013, Croatia joined the EU, thus becoming the only country in the Western Balkans that ceased to be categorized as such.

Another issue worth considering is the link between the term Western Balkans and the geographical

¹⁶ "Il y passe une grande route dont l'importance stratégique est mise en relief par la guerre actuelle. Elle joint la vallée de la Nichava, avec la ville forte Nich (Naissus des Romains) pour capitale, et le bassin de Sofia au Danube, en passant par Orhanieh, Plevna, Nicopoli, et envoyant de Plevna un rameau à Roustchouk par Biela sur la Yantra. Enfin le col de Gintsi (1508 mètres), dans le Balkan de Berkovitsa, et celui de Saint Nicholas (Sveti Nikola, 1385 mètres), près de la frontière serbe, livrent passage à deux autres routes très-importantes aussi, pour la stratégie comme pour le commerce. Ce sont celles qui relient les places fortes et commerçantes de Vidin et Lom-Palanka, sur le Danube, d'une part avec Sofia et l'intérieur de la Turquie, de l'autre avec Pirot (ou Charkoi), centre d'industrie bulgare au sud des Balkans occidentaux et avec Nich qui surveille la vallée de la Morava, porte naturelle de la Serbie." (ÉHRL, 1877, p. 659).

¹⁷ Les coups les plus sensibles les ont frappés alternativement, tantôt en Europe, tantôt en Asie. Chefket Pacha a été battu sur la route d'Orchanie à Plevna, Ismaïl-Hakki Pacha a capitulé à Têliche, l'investissement de Plevna est devenu un fait accompli, presque toute la Bulgarie occidentale a été envahie par la cavalerie russe, et les Balkans occidentaux sont déjà menacés." (JDPL, 1877, p. 1)

¹⁸ "Agenda 2000: For a stronger and wider Union" comprises a single complete framework offering a clear and coherent vision of the Union's future on the threshold of the 21st century.

¹⁹ Cyprus, Hungary, Poland, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Slovenia.

²⁰ Under Tito, Yugoslavia became a federation of six republics: the Socialist Republic of Serbia, the Socialist Republic of Croatia, the Socialist Republic of Slovenia, the Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Socialist Republic of Montenegro and the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, with two autonomous provinces, Kosovo and Vojvodina, which enjoyed a degree of self-government.

²¹ The Nice European Council in December 2000 concluded that the Balkan countries subject to the Stabilisation and Association Process and the CEFTA countries should be invited to participate as potential members (Consilium, 2000). A year later, in Laeken, the EU committed to fully support the countries of the region in continuing their efforts within the Stabilisation and Association Process (Consilium, 2001). In 2002 in Copenhagen, the European Council reaffirmed the European perspective of the Balkan countries and emphasized its determination to assist their efforts to move closer to the EU (Consilium, 2002). The Brussels European Council in 2003 reiterated the EU's commitment to the European integration of the Western Balkans, acknowledging the progress made in regional cooperation and the accomplishments of the Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAA) objectives, while emphasizing that the pace of accession depends on each country's reform efforts (Consilium, 2003).

space it represents. The elements of the natural environment manifest themselves in two ways: on the one hand, as the physical framework of a traditional regional entity; on the other hand, as a backbone, i.e., a dominant and often existential element of the region (Fuerst-Bjeliš, 2015). If the toponym Balkan is used to refer to Stara Planina, it should reflect the dominant influence of that mountain range on the region, which is not the case. Therefore, the term Balkans in the phrase Western Balkans is not correctly used, but it is difficult to replace it with another toponym, given the geographical diversity of the area it indicates. Another element to consider is the Western attribute, placed next to the proper noun Balkans, which refers to their geographical location within the Balkan peninsula. In this context, the use of the Western attribute makes sense, given that the countries in question are located on the western side of the Balkan Peninsula. However, from the perspective of the European integration process, the term Western Balkans also includes areas that fall within the Central Balkans, indicating that the definition is not grounded in strictly geographical criteria and thus lacks a consistent territorial foundation.

Therefore, since the term *Western Balkans* has since 1998 meant a political, geopolitical and technical construct, moving away from a strictly geographical definition, which, as we have shown above, was not entirely correct, it should lose its relevance with the accession of the countries of the region to the EU. The proof of this is Croatia, which now "counts" or is perceived exclusively as a member of the EU.

To summarize, the term *Western Balkans* is a compromise solution, designed to respond exclusively to the current political-administrative requirements at the regional and European level.

While the term has been used in various contexts in the press, as was also found in writings of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries, its inclusion in official documents has contributed to its conceptual consolidation. Thus, the Western Balkans became a recognized region characterized by the processes and conditions specific to the pre-accession stages of the European Union.

The term *Western Balkans*, on the other hand, cannot be found in any major political science dictionary, as it is a relatively recent phrase describing the EU's strategy towards the former Yugoslav countries (except Slovenia and Croatia), along with Albania. The choice appears intentional, suggesting that, although located outside the core Western space, these countries could adopt the organizing principles of modern Western

societies. However, the use of this terminology does not automatically imply their integration into the European Union.

The opinion of the world-renowned cartographer Mirela Altić, Associate Professor at the Department of History, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Zagreb and Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Social Sciences (Zagreb), who gave an interview to the Croatian publication *Glas Koncila*, is also worth mentioning: she argued that the term Western Balkans is a political term without a historical and geographical basis, having been invented by the European bureaucracy. She added that the term is in total contradiction with the principles of geographical regionalization of Europe, as well as with the geographical definition of the Balkan Peninsula (Čutura, 2018).

In conclusion, for more than 25 years, the region known as the Western Balkans has been an integral part of European geopolitical dynamics. Historical analysis shows that the use of the term Western Balkans dates back to the 19th century (1831-1834), with the concept of the Western Balkans emerging over time as a political, economic, and geopolitical construct rather than a mere geographical delimitation. The evolution of this term has been strongly influenced by historical transformations, the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, and the stabilisation and association processes promoted by the European Union.

The Western Balkans is, therefore, a region in a continuous process of redefinition, both geopolitically and in terms of identity. Despite economic, social, and political challenges, these states continue to express their desire for European integration, and EU support remains essential to achieve this goal. However, the future of the region depends not only on European policies but also on each country's ability to implement sustainable reforms and overcome the historical legacy of internal conflicts and divisions. Thus, it remains to be seen whether the Western Balkans will succeed in transforming this label from a temporary geopolitical construct into a stable and prosperous reality within a united Europe.

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