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MYTHS OF THE EUROPEAN CRISIS

BALKANISM – BALKANIZATION - BALKANIBALISATION

Virtual and viral in the eyes of the West, the Balkans are being constructed as a piece of darkness in the heart of Europe, a signifier for the exotic, the irrational, mythic and the forbidden, the utopian and the anachronic, the classical ground of the European civilization and the frightening vision of its future in cultural and territorial fragmentation, of dissolving into a set of small, mutually hostile units. The Balkans were almost never playing the role of a distinct geographic, but merely phantasmatic, virtual space, for projecting fears upon, the basic one being the fear of the viral influx across the borders of the modern civilized world, threatening it with social anarchy, chaos, decadence and even degeneration, which were all considered as the ultimate results of incorporating a sort of '**BALKANISM**'. The 'Orient in Europe', as the Balkans used to be frequently named, was thought to have both the power and the tendency to contaminate with its very idiomatic features of a specific type of quasi oriental behavioural pattern, combining anarchy with despotism, the cultural, social and the geographic body of the continent to which it was totally alien.

The danger constantly flowing from the Balkans up the Danube, to Austria, Germany and then to the West, as the almost invisible stream in reverse to the mainstream of cultural colonization of what was considered as the extreme margins of Europe, was in different time periods represented in the form of the plague, some total Slavic invasion, spread of communism, of vast illegal immigration or the infectious tendency towards disintegration on ethnic grounds, evoked in the mixture of totalitarianism and populist authoritarian corporatism. The standardized, general label, comprising any particular content of that fear came to be put formulated as '**BALKANIZATION**'.

Already in the first, yet not so pretentious, occasion of mentioning the term, in a 1918 newspaper commentary on the political visions and fears of Walther Rathenau, who was at that time the head of AEG and the leading proponent of idea of Central European Economic Union, one can already spot traces of the basic Euro-American fear of insecurity, related to the future of the Central European region after the disappearance of great Empires, and the impact that it could have on the whole Western World. Both the tone and the content of the article, deeply concerned with the fate of Europe, as dependent on the solution of the Balkan crisis, were subsequently echoed for a number of times through the twentieth century, which has even ended with a major raid against the statesman who was in Western press colloquially called 'The Balkan Butcher', more precisely with a NATO military action claimed to be just a method of ending another 'Balkan war' and establishing stability in the region. One of the White House counsellors on the regional issues of the Balkans, and one of the advocates of that action, Robert D. Kaplan has even stated in the book that became the compendium of eroticising the Balkans, the following:

"Twentieth-century history came from the Balkans. Here men have been isolated by poverty and ethnic rivalry, dooming them to hate. Here politics has been reduced to a level of near anarchy that from time to time in history has flowed up the Danube into Central Europe." (Kaplan, Robert D: *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History*, New York: St. Martins Press, 1993, page xxiii)

The European fascination with the terrifying aspects of the mythic and exotic notion of the Balkans, has shown to be fitting quite well into the tradition of veneration of the wild

and strange 'otherness' of tribal cultures, which is generally agreed to date from Montaigne, who had, through his essay on cannibalism, prepared the ground for thinkers in the later eighteenth century, known for vastly exploring the topic. On the other hand, it has happened that the Balkans per se, as a distinct geographic, social and cultural entity, were 'discovered' by European travellers exactly from the late eighteenth century on, with the beginning of awareness that the European possessions of the Ottoman Empire had a distinct physiognomy of their own that merited separate attention apart from their treatment as mere provinces of the Ottomans or simply as archaeological sites. The 'Balkanites' whom the travellers were meeting on their way could neither be fully set into the framework of the noble ancestors and keepers of what was considered as the highly auratic and powerful archaeological treasures of the "classical ground of the European civilization", nor of the bearers of Ottoman legacies in Europe; they could not be seen either as 'noble' or 'savage', 'barbarian', but only as some uncanny combination of the two, as the peculiar sort of violent 'noble savage' species, the ones who show in flesh and blood the possibility of debasement of the European civilization, the bearers of the threat of **'BALKANIBALIZATION'**.

"I have tried," wrote, for instance, on that topic, a much later traveller, named Brailsford, H. N, passing through the Balkans in the first years of the twentieth century, "I have tried, so far as a European can, to judge both Christians and Turks as tolerantly as possible, remembering the divergence which exists between the standards of the Balkans and of Europe; in a land where the peasant ploughs with a rifle on his back, where the rulers govern by virtue of their ability to massacre upon occasion, where Christian bishops are commonly supposed to organize political murders, life has but a relative value, and assassination no more than a relative guilt; there is little to choose in a bloody-mindedness between any of the Balkan races – they are all what centuries of Asiatic rule made them." The beginning of the twentieth century was, in that respect, burdened by fear that what has happened to the Ottoman possessions on the southeast of Europe, i.e. total fragmentation, can also happen to the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empire, and consequently to the other ones, like the Spanish, British, etc., and that fear was projected into the imagined character of the Balkanites, as the potential cause of the events to come. A series of territory-oriented wars throughout the century, taking place on the Balkans, starting from the first and the second Balkan War, then the first and the second World War, followed with revolutions, counterrevolutions and finally Yugoslav secession wars, did keep up this notion of a specific 'genius loci' of the Balkans as the mythic territory constantly producing catastrophes. Therefore the very last years of the century did still have the same spirit in writing on the issues related to the Balkans, even straightened by the subsequent overlap of the gaze defining the standpoint of a traveller from the West, with the simulation of the same gaze by those Balkanites that tended to belong to the West themselves, so that during the late days of the last war in the twentieth century, the following lines, taken from a diary of Mentor and Teuta Bytyci a young couple from Prizren, Kosovo, were published in the Guardian under the title "Bombs, shooting and a long wait": "Prizren is full of movement today, but I am not going out. I haven't been out since it started. I heard today that Adrian is dead. Nobody knows what happened to him he disappeared when he was playing basketball – and they dumped his body outside the prison. He was just a young boy with a nice car. Then there was Hussein, the chemical engineer who worked in the wine factory. He told his wife that he is coming home for lunch and they didn't find his body for 15 days. When they did she only knew it was him from his shoes. We don't know what is going on. We stay inside. Oh, I forgot to tell you. Today they blew up the first bridge in Novi Sad. Now

it is just a question of time of how long Serbia can go on existing and the **BALKANIBALISM** will be over.”

The cannibalistic savage, noble but cruel, non-congruent to the principles of Western rationality, was throughout the history of Europe recognized in many different spots on the globe, from the Brazilian coast to the far north posited inland territories of Siberia. That process went in parallel to its objectification and absorption of the worlds at what it perceived to be – and defined as – its ‘margins’, making the visible, public face of the process of the global expansion of the Western world through constructing the exotic ‘other’ as object in western art and anthropology. Formed in early twenties, as a Serbian version of the international DADA movement, has built on the analysis of the possible ricochet effect of the on-going process of colonial appropriation, as expanding military and economic imperialism, being paralleled with cultural colonialism. Zenit has proclaimed following the principles:

1. A superior stance towards the recent protector, Madame Europe
2. Complete refusal of her materialist civilization
3. New-age affirmation of the meta-cosmic idea of mystical type – of Zenitoman
4. Resurrection of the serbobalkanian archetype of MANHERO in internal resurrection of BARBAROGENIUS.

Their main idea was that European culture became too old and schematized, and that from the very beginnings of contemporary art movements it actually was getting energy from its Other, found in so-called ‘primitive’ cultures. Concerning that Balkanian culture was considered as one of the primitive cultures, it could be actually made the very source of energy for the European culture, and bringing Europe to that source would be the role of Barbarogenius Decivilisateur. Instead of the process of Europeanization of the Balkans, which was quite often tackled about as a political goal, they proclaimed the Balkanization of Europe, as a cultural goal of traversing through the basic phantasies of the West and, obverting the process that Maria Todoriva has, paraphrasing Edward Said definition of ‘Orientalism’ defined as ‘Balkanism’, which could be described as: “the corporate institution for dealing with the Balkans – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short... a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over Balkans”.

The very idea of this project is to restage, rearticulate and re-interpret the spirit of the radical gesture of the Zenit movement, showing the way in which the virtual and viral character of the Balkans can be pushed to their outmost limit, showed as pure phantasms to be done with, in a manner fit to the contemporary times.