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## MEMORIES FROM A POSSIBLE FUTURE:

THE INTERPRETATION OF CITIZENSHIP DURING THE FIRST BALKAN  
CONFERENCE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS TODAY

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness about the Balkans — a region synonymous with conflict and violence — and write on the possibility for a peaceful coexistence in the region. This study aims at recognizing insights that can aid conflict-solving in Southeastern Europe. At the threshold of a new millennium the existence of the Balkan conflict is one of the confusing dimensions of modern history and a puzzle to most people. Like many other conflicts to a great extent it had evolved out of misunderstanding and ignorance, and thus solving it has become not an easy task.

Writing identity, as well as writing about identity is a quintessentially modern predicament intertwined in the deliberate act of *writing* as *arriving* at a state of consciousness. The writing process, in itself, proffers a textual ordering of the world arranged according to an individual point of view, (which by definition is selective) and displays a particular identity perspective. In this sense, put in the contemporary context of globalisation politics, it would be stimulating to explore voluntary identity and citizenship (two essentially modern concepts of identity unravelled in the wake of current European integration) in the 1930s discussions of the future of Southeastern Europe. These discourses map some of the cornerstones of modern being in search for the boundaries of selfhood. In this context, the Balkan Conferences exhibit an interesting document for the study of the formation of concepts of identity and citizenship among regional ethnic communities as an outline of the modern discourse on selfhood in the wake of the First World War and on the threshold of the Second. In their discussions on a prospective peaceful coexistence the participants were adumbrating two somewhat distinct concepts of selfhood: 'voluntary identity'<sup>1</sup> and citizenship.

Voluntary identity, as it would be viewed in this research, depicts the idea of an independent choice of individual identity accentuated by a more flexible understanding of cultural frontiers; it is an articulation of the conjecture of the past with the social, cultural and economic relations of the present. Citizenship, would mean belonging to a tradition of a distinctive society, whose individuals imagine their future in the invoked memory of a particular past, articulated in a designated language (in other words *subject*-identity). Thus, this sense of a willed consciousness is presented as more rigid and less flexible than voluntary identity.

Топография культуры

Conflict solving, per se, is a process in which all sides involved attempt to piece together their tensions and conflicting issues, finding a way out of the quagmire beleaguering them. To put it another way, this is a decision-making approach, cracking the hard shell of a conflict and opening the way for penetrating deeper into its core. The regulation of conflicts is a very ingenious process, because conflict, per se, is a very creative force. It takes a lot of flexibility, knowledge and most of all willingness and desire for unraveling the tackled issue, in order to conduct it successfully.

The end of the Cold War was to steer in a New World Order where peace would reign and the United Nations would finally govern with power and supranational impartiality. This idealist dream, however, soon crashed against the rocks of modern ethnic conflict. As a consequence, ethnic conflict has today become the greatest threat to the stability and security of the modern world.

Unfortunately, for the last ten years the region of Southeastern Europe has become a hackneyed expression for instability and backwardness in the world media. Violent intercultural conflicts have ruptured the fabric of Balkan societies. The fall of the iron curtain awoke the dormant specters of history and revived memories of the days when the region was better known as 'the powder-keg of Europe'. Ethnic tension, sectarian strife, communal divisions, and territorial disputes have plunged Southeastern Europe into the backyard of modern politics. Modern ethnic conflicts have become 'the most prominent security issue in Europe for the foreseeable future' (Karkoszka, 1993: 212).

Nonetheless, recently the Balkans are witnessing a 'new' type of developments: the reawakening of regional cooperation. One instance came as a result of the NATO air-strikes against Yugoslavia during its Kosovo campaign. The air-strikes destroyed vital infrastructure not only for Yugoslavia, but also for the entire Balkan region, closing effectively the easiest land route for many Balkan states to transport goods to and from the rest of Europe. The destruction of several bridges spanning the Danube river and the virtual closure of this waterway cut a vital link to Europe for countries like Romania and Bulgaria. In the aftermath of these events the Balkan states united their efforts for requesting compensation for their losses. One example is the joint declaration by the governments of Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Romania to the foreign ministers of the European Union. Moreover, in December, 1999, at the EU Summit in Helsinki, Finland three Southeast European states - Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey - have been invited to start talks for a full integration into the European Union. Before that, in November, 1999, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe held its forum in Istanbul, Turkey, which drafted the Charter for European Security signed by the majority of Balkans' heads-of-state. The capital of Bulgaria, Sofia, hosted the First Southeast European Economic Forum where regional finance minister, funding institutions, and NGOs met to discuss regional economic cooperation and the *common* future of the Balkans. In the post-Cold War period the Black Sea Economic

Cooperation Zone has been developed as a significant tool for regional cooperation and Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, and Turkey have been among its most active members. The conspicuous inference from these developments is that the Balkan region is at a turning point to break away from the vicious circle of violence, oppression, and instability. The wake of these events indicates a shift in political mind-set to one that fosters openness and recognizes and efficiently utilizes the resources and skill resident in the new global civil society.

However, it is important to stress that this is not a sporadic event. The seeds of regional cooperation have long been planted in the blood-stained soil of Southeastern Europe. The Balkans have not only been an 'ingredient' to war, they have also cradled the idea of European integration. It is history, which is traditionally blamed for the problems of the beleaguered Balkan region. But if one is to look more carefully under the surface of history he or she would immediately stumble upon the forgotten roads to peaceful coexistence among the different ethnic groups in Southeastern Europe. Not so long ago, just some hundred years ago, there was a strong intellectual movement in the region which espoused to the ideals of federalism and unionism. Even before the arrival of nationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Southeast European intellectuals have been discussing the possibility for a regional cooperation. It is as a result of this movement that the idea of a Balkan federation came forth. The vitality and inspiration of this image were tested in the 1930s during a series of Balkan Conferences, which challenged the status quo of the nation-state and proffered the bold and daring prospective of a genuine Southeast European union as the first step to an intended European Union.

This research calls for a more innovative approach to solving conflicts in the region. Traditional methods of hostilities regulations are based on interstate relations while ethnic tensions are different in nature and are not subject to third-party power-based mediation.

Most ethnic conflicts involve the rights of ethnic groups to maintain their identity, to have equal status with other groups, and to have equal access to decision-making. Societies with ethnic differences often divide along ethnic lines in such a way that some ethnic groups are forced to integrate into the national culture of the state in which they find themselves, the threat to their identity can readily lead to frustration, polarization and violence (Miall, 141).

Thus the state cannot and could not with political tools resolve or influence ethnic tensions; it can only exacerbate them. Taking into account the wider perspective and all-permeating nature of ethnic conflicts calls for a more broader approach to the problems of the Balkans.

#### THE DREAM OF A BALKAN UNION

The idea of federalism in Southeastern Europe is not new to the region (Padelford, 1935). Some are tempted to view the ancient Hellenic,

Bulgarian and Serbian empires as instances of this idea; and the Ottoman empire, per se, as a 'federation of theocracies under the scepter of the Sultan' (Geshkoff, 1940: 14). But these assumptions are incorrect, because they misrepresent the genuinely democratic nature of the idea of a Balkan Union. It did not have as its objective the revival of any of the old regional empires, but rather it aspired to the formation of a completely new system of government and state. In many respects the idea of a Balkan Union, as it emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, viewed the memory of the ancient Balkan monarchies as detrimental to its objectives:

But let us [the Balkan peoples] leave our sins behind, and let us *lock our ancient history*, on which we can look only as a source of evil and misery...  
*The quarrels which existed between us 450 years ago, are the reason for our plight today* (Karavelov, 1870).

For the revolutionary leaders at the dawn of the anti-Ottoman struggle, the recollection of the old Balkan empires posed a hurdle for the prosperity and security of the region. Even at this early stage, it was obvious that the peace of the Balkans depended on the ability of the different peoples to find ways for making the future their priority, rather than drowning in the memory of the past. Their common destiny is what brought them together. A Balkan Union provided the only viable solution for thwarting the threat of dividing the region into belligerent camps, buttressed by any of the great powers of the day. The Balkan peoples did not wish 'to substitute European... rule for that of the Porte' (Jelavich, 1993: 333).

The first attempt for uniting the struggle against the Ottoman oppressors came as early as 1789. It was very much influenced by the ideas of the French revolution, as well as the Declaration of Independence proclaimed in 1776. These two events inspired Rhigas Pheraios, one of the eighteenth century Balkan revolutionaries, to dream of a time when all the subjected peoples of the Ottoman empire would make a joint effort to cast off the shackles of captivity. For this purpose he found 'a secret revolutionary society.' (Geshkoff, 1940: 18).

At this stage, the movement towards a union in the European territories of the Ottoman empire was bolstered by the fact that still there was no distinct national consciousness developed among any of the Balkan peoples. Ethnic identity was still rudimentary and undeveloped, in spite of the existing efforts to raise national awareness in the region.

Rhigas understood the importance of keeping the fragile balance of ethnic diversity in the Balkans. He essayed to prevent the dangers of stirring separatist wars among the peoples of Southeastern Europe, and that is why he espoused the ideas of federalism. But despite Rhigas' commendable efforts and good intentions, he made the mistake of singling out the name of one of the ethnic groups and its language as the amalgamating factor for his prospective union. By designating Greek as the official language and national denominator for the proposed confede-

ration, Rhigas virtually made the integration impossible. However weak and tenuous the ethnic identity in the region at the time was, he, and completely unintentionally set the stage for ethnic antagonism.

That is why by the early nineteenth century, there was already a talk of a Balkan or a Danubian federation. Both adjectives, Balkan<sup>2</sup> and Danubian, derive from geographical entities, which do not hold a relation to any particular ethnic or linguistic group. Their connotative neutrality was one way of avoiding the enmity between different ethnic groups. But this simple change of adjectives also came to indicate at least two other developments.

One was the development of a separate identity among the different Balkan peoples. While in the late eighteenth century there was no distinctive ethnic consciousness developing in Southeastern Europe, as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century the necessity to find an ethnically detached adjective for the prospective union, shows that the processes of nation-building were already establishing themselves.

The other development was related to the religious identity of the Balkan peoples. Since Christianity was the predominant religion among the European subjects of the Ottoman empire, the anticipated Balkan Union was to include only its Christian subjects.

Our [the Balkan peoples'] salvation is in our joint uprising and in our cooperation. Turkey is our only enemy. No *Christian tribe* can be a friend of these thugs (Karavelov, 1873).

Due to the circumstances in which the Balkan peoples clashed with Islam and, subsequently, because of the suffering brought on them by its proponents in the region, generated a backlash and intolerance towards the Muslim peoples of the Ottoman empire.<sup>3</sup>

The first of these two developments became conspicuous very soon and elevated the movement of Balkan federalism to a new level. The fact of the Greek independence, achieved only after the interference of the great powers, added a new dimension to the liberation movement in the Balkans. It altered the situation in the region in such a way, that the only possible means of achieving the goal of a regional federation could be accomplished after the national liberation of each of the Balkan peoples.

Yet, even at this stage, the dream of a federal union in the Balkans did not fade, but established itself on a new basis and took a more mature form. After the middle of the nineteenth century there were several attempts to forge a Balkan alliance, all characterized by the desire to unite the *free and independent nations* of the region.

This feature is crucial to understanding the different Balkan independence movements. After Greek independence, the future Balkan Union was foreseen as an alliance of *free and independent nations*, abiding by the principles of equality, autonomy and interdependence. National liberty was the stipulated condition for regional integration. This argument is developed by the Slovenian philosopher Valentin

Hribar, who states that 'Only a sovereign nation can sovereignly abandon a portion of its sovereignty and transfer it to the international community' (Rupnik, 1996: 41). In this way the idea of national self-determination as a step towards a prospective Balkan union was planted in the minds of the Balkan peoples. Nationalism was seen as the necessary prerequisite for the success of federalism. The incentive was that only independent and nationally mature countries could form a successful federation.

But alongside this train of thought, a new idea was being surreptitiously introduced: the concept of a supra-national, Balkan consciousness: *'let us unite... Our religion and our customs through the centuries have grown similar'* (Karavelov, 1871). The notion of a common Balkan identity is quite peculiar and interesting phenomenon for Southeastern Europe at the time. It came as an expression of the shared experience of the different ethnicities in the region as well as their common needs and expectations. Moreover, this feeling of a collective belonging came to indicate that unlike the nation in which people rallied around their common history, culture, and religion, Balkan consciousness represented a common allegiance to a system designed to accommodate wide differences.

In this way through federalism, was accentuated the fact that among the different ethnic groups in the Balkans, there were more similarities than differences. The centuries of Ottoman oppression had united the peoples of the region not only in their suffering, but also in their religious practices, as well as the celebration of their customs and traditions. This emphasis on the collective experience of the European subjects of the Ottoman empire had the objective of forging a Balkan consciousness as the connecting element of a prospective federation.

Blit this concept of a shared identity, also had more immediate goals; and in particular to prevent foreign influence in the region. The great-powers had already started to muscle their policies in the region, under the auspices of balance of power, and the 'idea was that the Balkan peninsula should be divided into an eastern and western "sphere of influence"' (Pribichevich, 1939: 122). Balkan consciousness was to be the antithesis of foreign intrusion in Southeastern Europe. It was envisioned, that it would provide an answer for the ethnic tensions of the region, and when a federation of the Balkan nations was established, it was to buttress the process of developing a supra-national identity for the constituent peoples. In this way Balkan consciousness was to simmer down ethnic tension and thwart foreign intrusion.

For example the Bulgarian liberation movement was dominated by the idea of a Balkan federation. The chief objective of the Central Bulgarian Revolutionary Committee, established in 1870, was 'the formation of a federation, including Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Montenegro and Greece, in which each nation would be autonomous' (Jelavich, C. and B., 1977: 138). Hence, the Bulgarian liberation movement, though national in character, was federalist in its objectives. It worked for propping up Bulgarian national consciousness, but at the same time

supported the movement for the common future of the Balkan peoples.

A nation, which wants to develop and live free and independent, must be generous and refrain from taking advantage of the weaknesses of smaller nations, and impose its own will on them, against their national interests and rights. Today, in the nineteenth century in which we live, we have witnessed all illusions of slavery vanish and the historical rights... have slumped back and given way to freedom and human rights (Karavelov, 1871).

The vision of a prospective union of the different Balkan peoples drove them to take part in each other's national struggles. For example there were many Bulgarians, Serbs, and Albanians, who gave their life in the struggle for Greek independence. At the same time there were many Bulgarians who joined the Serb liberation struggle.<sup>4</sup> In this way the different anti-Ottoman movements in the region, could be easily designated as Balkan. The revolutionary leaders spoke of the fundamental human rights of the peoples living in Southeastern Europe. They reasoned out that the nation consists of individuals, whose rights and freedoms should be recognized and protected, because 'national affiliation is a result of a conscious act by the individual' (Ivanov, 1996: 31). And in the Balkans this could happen only when the rights and freedoms of individuals from all nations in the region are recognized. Hence, the only way to alleviate the misery of oppression was by fostering a *spirit of brotherhood*. This provided fresh hope that the darkness of oppression could be dispersed with the joint effort of the independent Balkan nations. This is the idiosyncratic aspect of all Balkan nationalism movements. Their objective was the creation of independent national states. They were the prerequisites that would prepare the ground for the union of the independent Balkan nations. Because "'Union is the death of tyrants.'" If the nations wake up and in thousands of voices uphold this great truth, only then will they be able to enjoy happiness and peace' (Karavelov, 1871).

This is how the idea of the establishment of a Balkan 'federation of independent nationalities' was proffered (Karavelov, 1871). The formation of a national consciousness as a step towards federalism was an important facet of the Balkan liberation movements. The dream of a union was founded on the existence of a shared consciousness among the peoples of Southeastern Europe and it is very unfortunate that this fantasy never became reality. But like all dreams, its memory is still very much alive in the subconsciousness of the Balkan peoples today. Perhaps, one day it will come true, so that the people of the region can achieve prosperity, and overcome the national antagonism that divide them today.

#### THE FIRST BALKAN CONFERENCE

The period after the First World War was in many ways a propitious period for Southeast European cooperation. This was the result of similar developments in the rest of Europe, which facilitated the emer-

gence of a Balkan integration movement. The first half of the 1930s was marked by a growing perception that people in the Balkans were part of one common Southeast European community. The two prominent incentives for the evolution of this cognition were the rise of pacifism and the advent of the Pan-European ideal.

The opposition to war and other forms of violence emerged as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century. Pacifism became a fully fledged movement only after the founding of the League of Nations, and the hope that this organization would be able to achieve the elusive dream of collective security. In a nutshell, pacifism's primary tenet of non-violence called for an ethic that recognized human society's proneness to conflict, and yet it strove to save it from the endless cycles of futile conflict.

Following in the steps of pacifism was the idea of a united Europe spelled out in 1923, in the prophetic work of Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalegri, *PanEuropa*. It presented an alternative to the pessimistic view of civilization presenting an outline for a prospective European integration. Coudenhove-Kalegri clarified that only a strong and united Europe can maintain lasting liberty and attain greater freedom for the individual. The immediate offspring of his inspiration were the Locarno Pact signed in 1925, for cooperation and security among Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain, and Italy, and the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact for the renunciation of war and the peaceful settlement of conflicts (*LNOJ*, 1930).

These developments did not leave the Southeast European region untouched. In particular the period 1929–1934 saw many activities aiming at accomplishing the idea of uniting the Balkans and thus settling the conflicts in the region. The idea of a Balkan Federation was not foreign to the region. The old idea of Southeast European national solidarity popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was revived in the early 1930s. However, its legacy was very much altered by the changing nature of European politics, per se. All Balkan states were constantly urged by international organizations like the League of Nations, the International Peace Bureau and others to embrace a peaceful settlement of their differences.

A very important prerequisite for inaugurating the process of Balkan integration was the 27<sup>th</sup> Universal Peace Congress convened in Athens, Greece in October 1929. This event was attended by delegations from all Balkan states at the time with the exception of Albania (Geshkoff, 1940). The Congress' Committee on Balkan Affairs issued a resolution insisting that the International Peace Bureau and the Interparliamentary Union should convene a special Balkan Conference under the aegis of the League of Nations. Taking cue from this recommendation the International Peace Bureau on the 12 May 1930, during its Geneva meeting, forwarded invitations to the foreign ministers of all Southeast European states asking them to send their representatives to participate in a prospective Balkan Conference. 'This gracious move evoked favourable reactions... and resulted in the appointment of the ambassadors at Athens as official observers' (Padelford, 1935: 11).



In the ferment of these events crystallized the idea that the formation of a pan-European state must commence with the establishment of a 'pan-Balkan federation' (Manchev, 1931: 51). This awareness brought about four Balkan Conferences in the early 1930s. All of them aimed at the realization of the idea of a Southeast European union. The Balkan public as well as the regional press followed these events closely and the movement towards federal organization in the region provoked an open discussion on the topic. The First Balkan Conference was the most auspicious, in the sense that it was marked by a feeling of mutual understanding and a common effort to overcome difficulties uncharacteristic for the region. The ex officio President Papanastassiou remarked:

We have usually been regarded as a source of misunderstanding and conflicts. But now, for the first time in our history, we all have assembled of our free will, firmly determined, in spite of all obstacles, to cement a solid and durable understanding among ourselves. We shall prove today... that the Balkan peoples are and will in the future be masters of their own destinies and that we shall work so as to develop in this corner of Europe a new and bright civilization which will illuminate the world (Geshkoff, 1940: 87).

The Conference was officially inaugurated on 5 October 1930 in Athens, Greece. The symbolism of this meeting was indicative to the goals of this conference:

the solemn opening of the plenary assembly of the First Balkan conference took place in the hall of the Greek chamber of deputies, in the presence of ninety four delegates, twenty-five secretaries and experts, and eighteen observers... The Balkan flag, with six golden stars and six stripes symbolizing the incipient Balkan Union, was conspicuous in the beflagged Greek parliamentary hall. A chorus, accompanied by the Athens municipal band, sang the "Hymn of Peace" and the "Balkan Hymn" (Geshkoff, 1940: 87).

The presence of a Balkan flag and anthem more than anything else suggested the intent of the organizers to fulfill the dream of Southeast European unity. The First Balkan Conference, more than the others that followed it, considered the different ways to carry through Southeast European integration. For that purpose the Conference established six committees: organizational, political, intellectual, economic, social, and one on communications (*Zariya*, 1930). The main intent of the Conference was to strengthen the economic, political, and cultural relations among the Southeast European states as a basis for a prospective Balkan federation (Papanastassiou, 1931).

Peace, freedom from influence and intrigue, and the rational development of the economic life of the [Balkan] peninsula are... the objects to be sought by a union. In order to attain these ends, political, economic, social, and intellectual union are essential (Padelford, 1935: 13).

The major incentive of the Conference was the awareness that the conflicting issues of Southeastern Europe require cooperation among the countries. The consequential implications of this pan-Balkan meeting came in the discussions of political, economic, and minorities issues.

There was a voluble dispute in the committee on political relations on the question of the inception of Balkan integration: was it to begin with political, economic, or cultural union. On the one hand, the representatives of Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey deemed it essential to set out with an immediate political unification, which they believed would forthwith solve all conflicting issues. On the other, Yugoslavia and Romania contended that the first step had to be an economic merger of the Balkan states as the prerequisite of a possible political federation. In spite of the polemical debate the committee succeeded to adopt a statute, which declared that the Balkan Conference exists to facilitate the political integration of the peoples in Southeast Europe (Papanastassiou, 1934). It also proffered a 'general resolution – that delineates the makeup of a prospective Balkan Union' (*Zariya*, 1930). This was envisioned to be a pan-Balkan association of the Southeast European states modeled either on the Swiss or on the American federation. A notable aspect of the resolution of the political committee was its declaration that the foundations of the proposed pan-Balkan state would not undermine the bedrock of national integrity (*Zariya*, 1930). This statement is cognate with the consociational model of democracy proposed by Arend Lijphart in the 1960s. He infers that diverse communities are most predisposed to effect political integration if the dominant borders of cultural partition between them remain unquestioned (Lijphart, 1977). In other words in order to transform ethnonationalism, 'resolution must satisfy the need for recognition of collective identities without threatening the other group' (Ropers, 25). The political committee of the first Balkan conference had the prescience to realize the significance and vitality of national identity markers for the region not only at the present moment but also in the long run. 'Naturally all nations have their qualms and interests, and integration cannot be achieved unless attention is given to these issues' (Sakazoff, 1930).

Another noteworthy discussion was the one on economic integration in the region. It should be mentioned that the work of the committee on economic affairs must be canvassed in the context of the world economic recess at the end of the 1920s and early 1930s. The prospects for a possible economic cooperation in Southeastern Europe were viewed as a means of ensuring a larger economic independence for the region as a whole. The attempt to establish a pan-Balkan economic zone carried with it the precarious threat that the region could develop a self-supporting market favouring domestic goods rather than imported European ones. The emerging Balkan markets were eager to maintain their autonomy and take their place as international players. This called for the intensification of ties among Southeast European states. The economic committee of the Conference recommended the establishment of a free trade zone, joint financing institutions, as well as the establish-

ment of a joint Balkan trade policy (Katsarkova, 1989). It also considered the possibility for the development of customs and monetary union, and the institution of an inter-Balkan bank (*Le Mouvement Pacifiste*, 1930).

Despite these productive discourses and arguments the underlying motif of the entire Conference, which later proved to be the stumbling block for the establishment of a Balkan union, was the minorities issue (*Mir*, 1930). Then, like today, the question of ethnicities was the major source of conflict in Southeastern Europe. Minorities tend to escape an acceptable working definition. While some definitions remain too broad and thus offer little specificity, narrow definitions tend to be exclusive, which is problematic for minorities. Despite the difficulties in defining minorities in law and academia, minorities can usually be identified with relative ease in each particular case. No country in Southeast Europe (as indeed in the rest of Europe) was, and is, without minorities. The issue of ethnic minorities has emerged with the creation of different nation-states in the Balkans. But their voice has been particularly vocal with the peace settlements at the end of the First World War. The Treaty of Neuilly cut through diverse and ethnically-mixed territories regardless of the will of particular communities. Albania and Bulgaria were the two countries seeking revision of their unfavourable peace accords. The delegations of both countries threatened not to attend the conference unless a full investigation of the issue was conducted and an acceptable arrangement was agreed upon (*L'Esprit International*, 1930). Eventually, both of them agreed to postpone the debate on this issue to a later date, and in the meantime the Conference undertook to establish a special commission on the minorities (*Zariya*, 1931). Thus from the very beginning it becomes conspicuous that the key to Balkan integration is the solution to the minorities question (*Utro*, 1930). Sakazoff, one of the Bulgarian delegates to the Conference says, 'The hardest nut to crack is the minorities issue. Only after we have tackled it can we really embark towards a Balkan Union' (*Zariya*, 1930). The way both sides made concession and partially recognized each other's claim reverberates the words of the Greek Premier Venizelos:

No one fails to appreciate the difficulty of bringing about a union of the Balkan states; we all recognize that it can be accomplished only by stages. But if you begin with the point on which agreement is easier, you will create an atmosphere in which the successive settlement of more difficult questions, about which differences of opinion are at present more serious, will become possible (Padelford, 1935: 12).

Thus the First Balkan Conference set forth an example of Southeast European cooperation and a mutual effort to solve the conflicting issues beleaguering the region. It evinced that problems can be tackled and resolved with the equal participation and recognition of all parties involved, but mostly through the outlining of the concept of *layered identity*. This discourse evidenced the advantages from preserving one's regional identity, but voluntary opting out for the accommodation

provided by an united Balkan dwelling. It is important to note that alongside the conference an array of other events – business meetings, cultural exchanges, exhibitions, sport games, etc. – were organized in order to promote ‘Balkan consciousness’. This further propagated the concept of Balkan federalism among the citizens of the Southeast European states. Most importantly the inference of the Conference is that there is a vast array of possibilities for lasting peace, which lay unexplored and which can be taken advantage of even today. It revealed that a constructive dialogue on the future of Southeastern Europe along shared interests and goals is possible. The Conference made clear that the challenges of peaceful coexistence can be tackled with a collaborative effort.

#### CONCLUSION

The perception of the common future of the different nations in Southeastern Europe was the main reason for embarking on this research. The developments in the Balkans in the last decade have emphasized the lack of cooperation among the countries in the region. Moreover, they have accentuated the inability of various ethnic groups to find ways for peaceful coexistence. Getting traction on intractable conflicts – particularly those that involve ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups with deep cultural differences between them – has always been a challenging issue. The roots of today’s problems in Southeastern Europe – the inability of various nations to cooperate and the so-called historical hatred that separates them – can be found in the arrival of nationalism and its interpretation of historical events. However, the only viable solution to the conflicting Balkan issues can come from the equal participation of all groups involved in the antagonistic strife.

The dawn of the twenty-first century finds the unstable Southeast European region in the same, if not more, precarious situation as at the commencement of the twentieth century. It is history, which is traditionally blamed for the problems of the beleaguered Balkan region. But if one is to look more carefully under the surface of history he or she would immediately stumble upon the forgotten roads to peaceful coexistence among the different ethnic groups in Southeastern Europe. For the last ten years this small has been present permanently on the evening news and on the front pages of most newspapers around the world. The crisis in former Yugoslavia and its subsequent break-up has crudely outlined the quagmire of Balkan politics and their volatility. In the post-Cold War period the Balkan states were left out of the main stream of integrational processes evolving in Central and Western Europe. That is how the region, per se, remained in the periphery of the big picture of European politics. Stuck in the mud of primordiality, the Balkans have posed a major challenge to the centralist model of the unitary state. The formation and establishment of national identities in the region has been hampered by the development of a multitude of sub-national, local identities. This fragmentation and discontinuity have furnished the unforeseeable manner of identities relations (Melucci, 1989).

Ethnicity remains an important resource for organizing collective political action in the Balkans. The emerging democracies of the region are burdened by its inheritance; but living beyond the boundaries of ethnic identity is something inconceivable in the Balkans. Southeast European isolation revived the old ghost of history and allowed for their specters to resuscitate ancient fears and hatreds. The so called change of 1989, when most communist regimes in Eastern Europe were ousted from power, was driven by a rejection of the overbearing, centralized dictatorship of the state and its heritage of repression. In the Balkans an idiosyncratic aspect of this process was the search for a new identity. A majority of the people living in Southeastern Europe were expecting a new, utopian alternative to replace the old order. But when this did not occur many nations looked back to the memory of their 'glorious' past. This substitution of reality plunged the region into its present day confusion. As a result the present states of the Balkan peninsula became an epitome of a new form of nationalism — ethno-centrism, which claims an absolute superiority based entirely on whether a person is viewed as a member of the group or alien to it. The present states of Southeastern Europe nourish a form of nationalism, which is the antithesis of the universality of human condition. Thus, by forging a strong group identity, these states promulgate ethnic, religious or linguistic egotism, which discriminates against others. This ethno-centrism brought back to life centuries' old antagonisms and further exacerbated regional cooperation. The majority of Balkan states have become prone to internal institutional disorder and deterioration. The First Balkan Conference has indicated the influence of local identities for Southeast European politics.

However, the juggernaut of globalization would bring in its wake the phenomenon of cooperation and unification, which would allow for diversity only on the individual level. The role of nation-states is changing as global civil society grows and becomes more robust. Every nation will inevitably detect that to defend its interest in a globally and technologically integrated planet greater effort will have to be devoted to multilateral strategies. Group identity as we know it today — be it local, regional, or national — would be altered to a degree that contemporary sagacity cannot predict. It is in the light of these developments that the dream of a Balkan Union, and particularly the very reality of the First Balkan Conference, suggest that the opportunities for a finding an enduring peace for the region are far from depleted. It prompts that 'efforts to resolve the conflict cannot be separated from those meant to establish and foster peace' (Rabie, 17). Any attempt at conflict regulation, which does not take into account the global dimension of ethnic conflict would only be 'an imperfect process that, no matter how well-conducted ... [that] leaves some potential for violence in nearly all multi-ethnic politics' (Lake and Rothchild, 42).

The first half of the 1930s saw Southeast European societies eagerly debating the prospect of regional cooperation. Today, most of them discuss and work for integration with the European Union. To a great

extent this is indicative of the legacy of the First Balkan Conference and the momentum it generated.

In the context of contemporary developments in the region the idea of a Balkan Union is perhaps the only viable approach to conflict resolution in Southeastern Europe. For one thing, in the Balkans, people as well as states were ready, at the beginning of the 1990s, to embrace the idea of their common destiny with the rest of Europe in a true European Union. The break-up of the former Communist Bloc was very much driven by a desire to stamp out the dominant position of the state as such and allow for individual diversity. Looking at the complexity of the Balkan conflict, I believe that the only durable solution to the problems of Southeastern Europe is the creation of a Balkan Union. In today's multicultural world the reliable path to peaceful coexistence and creative cooperation should start from self-transcendence, both on the individual and national level. Transcendence marked by the need to overcome historical limitations. At the opening of the First Balkan Conference the French senator La Fontaine said, 'Disunited you were the object of misadventures; united, you will be masters of your own destiny' (Geshkoff, 1940: 87).

The solutions, which any foreign power can offer for solving the problems in the region, can never be durable in the long run unless they are supported by the Balkan nations; otherwise they would only be a source for more confrontations. Superpowers come and go in the political theater of the region, but the people, who live here and call this peninsula their home, stay and have to suffer the consequences of foreign incursions. That is why a Balkan Union is the solution, which the small countries of Southeastern Europe could offer towards the stabilization of the region. This is the topic on which this study hopes to provoke a discussion.

The implementation of the idea of a Balkan Union would counter the clash of different interests in the region, because its realization can be achieved only through a genuine and dedicated participation of all the states in Southeastern Europe. The seeds of this cooperation have been planted for many years now, today they only need the proper cares to grow and bloom. The Balkan Union unlike any other attempt of conflict solving in the region is not going to be of short-term duration. This is mainly because it would involve not only governmental commitment to the process but also the active participation of ordinary people. The driving force behind it would be not only the recognition of particular ethnic and national rights, but mainly the establishment of a civil society in the region. That is why, I believe that the idea of the Balkan Union can be implemented only through the active participation of non-governmental organizations. The Southeast European governments cannot create a Balkan civil society through bills or any laws. This is a process that should be initiated by the very people who call the Balkans their home. This process would entail a change of vision, as well. A turn from looking back into the past for finding the explanation of contemporary issues into making the future the prerogative. This would be a difficult process, but not necessarily an impossible one.

The implementation of the dream of a Balkan Union depends predominantly on a mutual effort by all Southeast European states. Once generated this mutual effort would in a snowball fashion clear the way for the achievement of this idea. The results from such an effort can only bring about a significant change for the better in the entire region, which is also important for the security and prosperity of Europe as a whole. Recent developments have indicated that ideas for closer cooperation and integration are not foreign to the region.

It should be taken advantage of this momentum to further the process of regional cooperation. The recognition of Southeast European heterogeneity is necessary for its future, and the willingness to work within it and perhaps through it is the region's destiny. It is often overlooked that the endemic separatism of Southeastern Europe has also led to a crisis in knowledge production, which hampers the social, cultural and economic well-being of the region and has sentenced the region to its present-day backwardness. That is why the first step should be development of cultural exchange programs and pan-Balkan meetings which would generate support for the idea of a Balkan Union. The concept of 'learning' has only recently come forth as a crucial notion within the setting of European integration (Kohler-Koch, 1996: 370-71). The flow of knowledge and information dissipates deep-seated suspicions of the 'other' and thus advances cooperative relations among the different participants, by promoting mutual understanding. Within the 'multilevel system of governance' (Marks, 1993: 392) learning is perceived as a function of adaptable systems of 'governance under certainty' (Richardson, 1996: 20).

Parallel to the process of knowledge-exchange should be initiated a process of developing a common Balkan market, defense strategy, and foreign policy among the different Balkan governments. Integration along political, defence, and economic lines would cause less, if any, stress to the 'describable and measurable structural properties' (Rokeach, 1968: 1) of ethnic selfhood. Cultural identity, as the First Balkan Conference elicits, has always been the major source of conflict for Southeastern Europe. The residue of nationalism, or rather ethnocentrism, and most importantly the suspicion of the 'other' born out of it has been the major obstacle to the fulfillment of federalism. The ingenuity of the First Balkan Conference was to proffer political and economic integration, while individual identity remains unchallenged. It also indicated the important function of nongovernmental organizations for generating public support for the idea of unionism in the region. Their main role is to work for the establishment of a civil society based on the recognition of the basic human rights of all ethnic groups and the knowledge of the common destiny of all people who live in Southeastern Europe. This would urge the reluctant Balkan governments to look more favorably on this process. A very important factor for the creation of a Balkan Union is the existence of a supra-national, rudimentary form of Balkan consciousness. This shared cultural identity, could help in transcending the limitations of ethnic and national attachment. Southeast

European folklore with its symbols of cooperation and friendship undermines the nationalist and separatist ideologies of the region. In other words the role of nongovernmental organizations is to accentuate these and help for the creation of a Balkan civil society before the formation of a united Balkan state.

The Balkan Union could only be a supra-national state, where every ethnic, religious or linguistic groups would have their own cultural infrastructure and maintain its separate identity. The uniqueness of such a political formation lies in the fact that it provides answers on the individual level, because the Balkan Union could only be a democratic commonwealth of people. Being a macro-political model of conflict regulation, it would not eliminate differences, but would only manage them towards peaceful coexistence.

These are some of the issues that could be a starting point for debating the future of the Balkans. There has always been a common ground for a political union among the peoples of Southeastern Europe. I insist that a prospective Balkan Union would be the only viable solution to the problems of the region; and I am convinced that the present has made this conclusion obvious.

#### ENDNOTES:

- <sup>1</sup> David A. Hollinger, 'Authority, Solidarity, and the Political Economy of Identity', *Diacritics*, 29 (1999), 116-127 (p. 118).
- <sup>2</sup> For a detailed study of the linguistic, social and cultural etymology of the name "Balkan" see Maria Todorova (1997), *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press), Chapter One.
- <sup>3</sup> An intolerance, which unfortunately is obvious even today, and is often quoted as a reason for the present-day Yugoslav crisis.
- <sup>4</sup> A support for this claim are the poems which Ivan Vazov wrote for the Bulgarian volunteers who perished in the skirmishes. For example see "Zavurnalii se dobrovolec ot Serbia", "Boiat pri Gredetin" and "Pri Morava" in Ivan Vazov (1964), *Suchinenia*, vol. I (Sofia: Bulgarski pisatel).

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