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NON-PAPERS AND NON-MAPS FOR NON-WORLDS: A DELUSIONAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE BALKANS

Zoran Čičak

Member of the Ohrid Group, Skopje

Foreign Policy Expert and Writer, Belgrade

"There are no rules of architecture for a castle in the clouds."

- *G.K. Chesterton*

Prince von Metternich, the statesman and politician of the Austrian Empire, is reputed to have said: *"The Balkans begin on Rennweg".* The road in question, the *Rennweg,* is now in downtown Vienna, but in his times it was at the southern fringes of the city, still remembered as the high-water mark of the Ottoman invasion of 1683. Historians now agree that the remark in question was purely apocryphal – there is no valid historic source for it – but it anyway remained part of wider semantic games: where does Europe end and Asia begin, and whether the Balkans, indeed, are more an eastern part of the former or a western part of the latter?

Diplomats, scholars and men of letters alike were never in agreement where the Balkans actually begin: conservative Austrians were keen to associate it with Slovenia – "*where the reign of Slavic hordes begins*"; German protestants believed that the border between the two worlds should begin in Munich – for, as they would put it, "Austrian-Catholic *Schlamperei* starts in Bavaria" only to be developed in the Balkans "*in more horrific forms*"; and the Irish writer Bram Stoker, the author of *Dracula,* wrote in this famous Victorian novel that "*leaving the West and entering the East*", for his literary hero at least, happened in Budapest "*at the most Western of splendid bridges over the Danube*".

This enigmatic constant shifting of frontier demonstrates that, in the case of the Balkans, we are not dealing simply with real geography, but with an imaginary mapping which projects onto real landscapes shadowy, often unacknowledged ideological and cultural antagonisms. As Slavoj Zizek wrote as early as in 1999: "*These antagonisms display a material efficiency of their own and in turn help determine military, economic and political activity of real historical agents.*" One can, in that respect, recall the mythical Kingdom/Dukedom of Ruritania – a fictional country situated in an imaginary Eastern European space, a setting for the novels of Anthony Hope such as *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894) – which combined the German Catholic feudal conservative tradition with the backward Slavic/Romanian peasantry.

The geography, indeed, sometimes looks elusive, just as the history does, but one cannot avoid a sense of *Otherness,* whenever a specific kind of discussion about the Balkans begins: it lies somewhere else, always a little bit more to the southeast, with the paradox that, when we reach the very bottom

of the Balkan peninsula, we somehow magically escape the Balkans again: Greece is no longer Balkans proper, but the cradle of Western civilization.

While the sense of *Otherness* – a kind of irrational response to the mixed Byzantine, Ottoman and Communist legacies accumulated in this part of Europe over centuries – has had deep impact on much of the Western thoughts about Balkans, it also defined, far too often, the thoughts prevailing in the Balkans about themselves.

Indeed, many prejudices about the Balkans were initially created in the Balkans just to be taken for granted elsewhere later. As Dame Rebecca West put it in her seminal work "*Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*" in 1941:

> "*English persons, therefore, of humanitarian and reformist disposition constantly went out to the Balkan Peninsula to see who was in fact ill-treating whom, and, being by the very nature of their perfectionist faith unable to accept the horrid hypothesis that everybody was ill-treating everybody else, all came back with a pet Balkan people established in their hearts as suffering and innocent, eternally the massacree and never the massacrer.*"

There is no doubt that ancient myths in the Balkans, as well as in other parts of Europe and the wider world beyond, have had an important role in the process of modern nation-making. The idea of Europe itself – which included powerful historical figures such as *Charlemagne* and *Erasmus* – was also a myth, more often than not, before it became reality. What Rebecca West, however, implied by the sentence we quoted above is something else: still in her times (and, unfortunately, ours) the Balkans remained the realm of *disintegrated myths*, conflicting narratives and (far too often again) parallel realities which exist one alongside the other. Almost as if they exist in parallel worlds, one would say?

Well, in some respects they do. Several major European crises of the last decade – the financial crisis (2008), the migrants' crisis (2015), Brexit (2016), the Covid pandemics (2020) – each in turn further enhanced by the challenge of the Trumpian adventure in the US, have had a profound impact on the Balkans. They created the so-called *Enlargement Fatigue* – as ever more nations in the Peninsula now call the shared sense of bitter disillusionment over their respective European integration chances – something that is not an entirely new feeling in this part of Europe.

However, it looks as if an old fatigue is reappearing: not only elsewhere in Europe (indeed, the EU is just as tired of the West Balkans as vice versa), but in other fields as well. It is not only the enlargement policy itself that so often appears senseless, but classic diplomacy, and sometimes geography, as well.

One of the key features of the Trumpian world – which we unfortunately carried with us into the post-Trumpian one as well – is a sudden childish obsession with impressions: pictures and words which we believe are defining the context are more important than the substance (if any) which is behind them. A world in which nobody cares to read any more (but is keen to watch pictures instead) doesn't have the capacity to absorb facts: it is replacing them with impressions. Who was sitting where, who was the first Tweet about something, whose photo was fancier, who left the better impression?

Mighty weapons in these *wars for impressions* are all kinds of images: anything that might be photographed (or, indeed, far too often just photoshopped) and posted on social networks, in order to encourage existing or mobilize new supporters: pictures of a formidable Russian air career or some US Navy Seal unit in the middle of nowhere or a Chinese airplane full of vaccines arriving to save the world from pandemics.

The Balkans' favourites in this array of instruments are documents and maps: all sorts of them. Secret accords; top-level plans for *"the strategic resolution of a crisis";* minutes allegedly leaked from a high-level clandestine meeting; different kinds of "papers" that never really existed, but were artificially created, out of the blue, as if by a magic wand. The fact that such documents did not exist in the first place is self-explainable by the very name given to these papers: they are called *"non-papers",* usually attributed to *"confidential diplomatic sources"* and published in *"independent media",* whatever this term really means.

Alongside non-papers stand non-maps: maps from the middle ages, early modern maps, World War Two maps, sometimes all of them mixed together in an entirely delusional geography, the context for imaginary claims. So *non-papers* are serving as a basis for *non-maps* and vice versa.

I can recall several occasions where, in the course of slightly tense discussions, a foreign official has asked *"Are you going to give me that paper from which you are reading?"* and my instant serious reply has

been *"Oh no"*. The mere act of *handing over a paper* has an entirely different weight, compared to the act of not handing it over. The act, then, of inventing a non-paper is a source of amusement.

Once upon a time, classic diplomacy used to employ another term – an *aide-memoire* – to describe unofficial documents. But unofficial as it may be, the *aide-memoire* was an existing piece of paper, not a fake one. The very idea of a *non-paper*, however, was from the very beginning a subversive one, as over time any distinction between an *unofficial real document* (such as an aide-memoire) and *entirely fake item,* that never existed in the first place, was entirely blurred.

In the Balkans the recent practice of issuing *non-papers* coincides with another post-modern invention: the idea of separate *social totalities* associated around an anchor or pillar state, with parts of different sizes orbiting at different distances around it, just as in some artificial solar systems. The phrase itself was first time attributed to the Russian prince Iziaslav I of Kiev in the eleventh century in one of his paeons to Pope Clement I: *"… with gratitude to that faithful slave who increased the talent of his master – not only in Rome, but everywhere: both in Kherson and in the Russian world"*. In the Middle Ages, however, the same phrase referred to the extreme xenophobic and conservative layers of Russian society, that opposed the modernizing efforts of central governments in Moscow and its attempts to Europeanize Russia. Finally, in the twenty-first century a re-invention of the *"Russian world"* is a Putinesque instrument to extend Moscow's influence outside Russian borders: not only in the Caucasus, Ukraine, Moldova and other countries with substantial Russian minorities, but beyond.

In the Balkans, therefore, the concept of *separate worlds* certainly represents an instrument of exporting influence – Russian in the Orthodox and Turkish in the Moslem controlled lands of the Peninsula respectively. However, it is also much more than that, providing a strategic framework implying an inherently anti-modern, anti-European simplistic construct. The very idea that something like a *"Hungarian world", "Turkish world", "Russian world", "Serbian world"* or *"Albanian world"* might co-exist in the twenty-first century - physically intersecting but mentally ignoring each other - is a deeply medieval concept. Hanseatic ports on the Baltic; Venetian trading outposts in the Mediterranean; Protestant enclaves in Catholic Switzerland and Catholic enclaves in Orthodox Romania – a scheme created in the aftermath of the Augsburg peace accords in 1555 – were really different worlds, co-existing with each other and based on mutual exclusivity and personal, rather than territorial, concepts of sovereignty. History eventually abandoned this concept for good amidst the roar of Napoleon's cannons at Austerlitz and Jena, in the *Spring of Nations* in 1848, at Versailles 1919 and Potsdam 1945 the foundations of modern Europe were embedded in three simple

messages of the French revolution: *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*. The European Union - however imperfect, often inefficient and, occasionally, clumsy - so far remains the most perfect embodiment of these core messages: T*he best of all possible worlds*, or *Die beste aller möglichen Welten* as Leibnitz put it.

If Europe was careful enough to preserve its core values (sometimes at a higher price than those it ought otherwise have to pay) why did it not defend them more resolutely at its south-eastern fringe? Many disillusioned people in the Balkans now feel as if their part of Europe was not worth enough, so Europe abandoned them. Indeed, if the idea of a *"Hungarian world"* is so cherished by the governing elite of one fully-fledged EU member-state, one could hardly object to its twins, spreading themselves among non-members.

There are two kinds of borders in the Balkans now: old, real ones, drawn at peace conferences over the previous several centuries and which delineate states; and new, imaginary ones, designed to divide worlds. The underlying message to the whole region, in the last thirty years, has been that eventually all existing borders would vanish as the Balkans became part of European architecture. This, as we all know, didn't happen and instead of erasing borders the region started dreaming not only about redrawing the existing borders but about creating new "worlds" instead.

In that respect, both European and US decision makers should be reminded that, whenever the West was faced with increasing Russian influence in Europe, the only successful instruments to counter it in the Balkans were the political unity of the region, combined with enhanced material and social modernization and the framing of wider continental alliances. The impact of Bolshevik revolution on Hungary and Germany in 1919 was deferred by Anglo-French support to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, while Stalin's march on Czechoslovakia, Hungary and other Central European countries in 1948 was buffered by massive Anglo-American military and financial aid to Tito's Yugoslavia. The former was framed into the *Little Entente* (1921-1934), a wider regional alliance with pro-Western Czechoslovakia and Romania, while the latter forged a *Balkans Pact* (1953-1960) a mutual defence agreement with pro-Western Greece and Turkey - effectively albeit informally, an extension of NATO.

If our ancestors in the twentieth century would have reacted by creating small, backward and isolated "worlds" instead (thus making a quagmire of the *Westphalian Balkans*) the European south-eastern axis would be broken for good. And it will be broken now, if today's Balkans' elites, ones that are again dreaming about delusional geography (*non-papers and non-maps for non-worlds*), are not

replaced by ones that understand the long-term advantages of synergy, in the manner they did in both 1919 and 1948.