

Croatia as a Part of Western Europe – Myth or Reality?

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Abstract

Among the Croats, there is a belief that Croatia was (and is) part of the Western European world, especially until 1945 (a belief shared with the Slovenian, the Hungarian, Poles, Czechs and Slovaks). On the other hand, western scholars and writers often situate Croatia in the Balkans (and also in Central Europe; furthermore, Croatia is a Mediterranean country, a fact often overlooked in decision-making). The territory of present-day Croatia historically lied at the borders of empires (Eastern Roman Empire, Western Roman Empire, Byzantine Empire, Carolingian Empire, Austro-Hungarian Empire, Ottoman Empire). Croatia's historical flow was tumultuous (as any other small country) and diverse, as was its cultural flow, though to a lesser extent since culture requires cohesion and connects with other, similar, cultures. The Croatian culture features influences of the Latin culture, Greek culture, Western European culture and Ottoman culture. In this paper, I consider these factors and others, such as Eastern Europe after the Great Schism, Eastern Europe after 1945, and eastern Europe after 1990, and aim to answer a difficult and controversial question: whether Croatia ever belonged or currently belongs to Western Europe, and what are the circumstances and features that mark it. Furthermore, I also question the concept of westernness, and its criteria.

Key words: West, East, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Balkans, Central Europe, Mediterranean, Byzantine culture, Latin culture, Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Austro-Hungarian Empire, Ottoman Empire, westernness

Introduction

Among the Croats, there is the longstanding belief that Croatia was (and is) part of the Western European world, especially until 1945. On the other hand, western scholars and writers often situate Croatia in the Balkans. Croatia (and the Croats) do not have a univocal history. Unlike large countries (and nations), which perhaps do have such a history since they are the ones writing history (or making the divisions), small countries or nations are dependent on the large ones. Furthermore, Croatia is marked by an important specificity: its position at the borders of empires, or being divided by empires. At the beginning of its existence, Croatia was a frontier of the Carolingian Empire on the one side and the Byzantine Empire on the other (although more of its territory lied in the former). After the period of princes and kings who ruled independently, Croats entered into a personal union with the Hungarians. Later, they recognised the Austrian king as their own (1527), becoming part of the multinational Austro-Hungarian Empire,

while at its borders, parts of Croatia were being torn off by the Ottomans. Another important fact is that after numerous wars during the Middle Ages, the majority of the Croatian coast was occupied by the Venetians in the period of early modernity.¹³

These are the basic historical features or Croatia's historical framework. Affiliation with a particular civilisation depends not only on history, but also deeply on a combination of culture, social system or organisations, religion or ideological factors.¹⁴

Croatia's situation is complex. Regarding culture, three main layers are observable: Western European,¹⁵ Byzantine, and Ottoman. Given that Croatia officially belonged to Western European states,¹⁶ Western European elements have been evident in its culture and society throughout history.¹⁷ In fact, Croatia had contours of Western European societies during most of its history, although some of its territories were under Turkish rule (though for a shorter period of time than other Balkan countries). If this is correct, what about the unofficial culture?¹⁸ Was Croatia or the Croatian culture completely Western European, at least until 1945? My opinion is that it was not (perhaps in some period, such as in the 17th century, when some of its parts were under Turkish rule). At high levels, Croatia remained Western European, but at lower ones and in other types of culture, the affiliation was/is Balkan. An additional balkanization was exerted during the period of Yugoslavia, a pronounced Balkan country (though attempts to correct this have been made in recent decades). Taking into consideration the Croats in other countries where they are autochthonous and present in greater numbers, we can state that Croats belongs to at least two circles.

Starting from these points and questioning whether Croatia ever belonged to Western Europe, I will also question the criteria of westernness throughout history. The reason that motivated me to write this essay¹⁹ was the following. I was in a western European country and having a discussion on West vs. East in the global sense, and I received the impression that several people (from different western European countries) found it strange that I, as a Croat, would speak affirmatively of the West (if not identifying indirectly or latently with it). I reflected on that and added other thoughts that have occupied me in recent years, wondering why our ancestors believed us to be part of the Western European world (as an idea present directly or indirectly in older texts). Also, reading papers, newspapers and books, I found that a similar problem exists (as a preoccupation) among the Czech and Poles (and the Hungarian and Slovenes), nations also considered to belong to the European West. I revealed several analogies to

¹³ See, for examples, Pavličević 1996.

¹⁴ In division, I will not consider the economy or other superficial factors, but only deeper ones that create true division between countries (except in the contemporary sense, though these factors are not completely justified).

¹⁵ I use the term *Western Europe* or *Western European* (with a capital letter) to refer to cultural, ideological or a civilisation unit, and the term *western Europe* or *western European* (with a lower case letter) to a geographical unit.

¹⁶ Croatia, as legal subject with its own rights in retaining its parliament, sovereignty, and statehood, was part of Western European countries and states (Austro-Hungarian Empire) or those which considered themselves as such (Croatian-Hungarian Kingdom; whose grounds have yet to be proven here), or its parts were occupied for a longer period by a Western European country (Republic of Venice). This fact, among others, facilitated Croatia in acquiring Western European culture and Western European social particularities.

¹⁷ Ignoring their intensity and sometimes quality, these are the same elements.

¹⁸ In some cases, it is possible to call it a counterculture, at least in the sense that it is found to be unaccepted by the mainstream culture or high culture, though it is tolerated.

¹⁹ This presentation was given at the conference: *Heritage and New Horizons: Croatia and Croats in a Global Context Conference*, held at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia, in February 2024.

make this paper more coherent, and to bring it before a wider context (including certain stereotypes or common opinions in more than the European sense).

Firstly, there are two concepts of West: one in the global sense and the second in the European sense. Regarding the global West (both culturally and geographically), it encompasses all of Europe and the Americas,²⁰ and thus, the remainder belongs to the East (there are three Easts, based on their geographical and cultural proximity: Near East, Middle East and Far East, naturally, classified according to their distance from Europe, as an example of eurocentrism; their proximity to Western Europe, of course).

The second concept of West/East is the European one. There are at least three types, and these have changed over the course of the history, and justifiably so, with the exception of the last one, which is not based on cultural and/or ideological factors, but on economic power (and thus, not on the right grounds). The roots for this division lie in the Enlightenment. Those who thought it strange I would speak affirmatively of the West is because they identify the West/East division with the European one, which is another example of eurocentrism, in particular of western-eurocentrism.²¹

1. Concepts of the European West Throughout History²²

The concept of West has a long history and tradition (as well as the division into East-West), but I will not address these topics here (see, for example, Todorova, 2009: 11; Mac Sweeney 2023; though the latter examines only facets). Furthermore, there is a tendency in the academic area to erase any dichotomy or division in the postcolonial world and the world of integrations (European and others) and equality. After Wolff's announcement (1994) that Eastern Europe was invented in the Enlightenment by the philosophers and writers, something similar has now been stated for the West (and implicitly for Western Europe) by Mac Sweeney. However, there are more solid grounds for division.

1.1 Zero division or proto-division

This division is called zero division or proto-division because it did not affect us, or affected us only indirectly (peoples who live in Europe in, more or less, the same zones from the Middle Ages), with certain exceptions. *Id est*, it survived only partially, although this division was both political and cultural. It concerns the division into the Eastern and Western Roman Empire in antiquity. Today's Europe has grounds in that Europe, in the dusk of Europe, which we are familiar with since we had no knowledge

²⁰ For example, this is also Sweeney's vision of the West (although a bit from America's point of view, outlining features specific to the US perspective).

²¹ Here, I will not address the topic of Occidentalism (a negative or distorted vision of Westerners by Easterners, including Europeans, as a reaction to Orientalism by E. Said, applied also to Eastern Europeans, see, for example, Buruma; Margalit 2004 or Barnard; Spencer 1998), but I will address some examples of eurocentrism or, in particular, western-eurocentrism given that the latter is very important in shaping our perceptions of small countries and the Balkans (though the perception is not important here, but its result).

²² Cultural theorists and historians of culture or sociologists of culture (for example, Todorova, Wolff) question all the divisions of Europe into East-West, i.e., their bases (except religious or political ones). I will not consider the labels these divisions have or might have had, only to the extent such projections (originated by other, non-crucial, factors) provoke, or are provoked by real divisions, but I will take in consideration cultural, religious and ideological basis for division.

of the earlier one, i.e., we had no direct relations with it. The Western Roman Empire was dissolved in 476 AC, and the Eastern Roman Empire was dissolved after the Turkish invasion conquering Constantinople in 1453. Despite this fact, we are taught that the dissolution of the Roman Empire was in 476 AC, as another example of western-eurocentrism. Although this division itself was irrelevant for the Croatian culture,²³ and especially for later Croatia, the territory of present-day Croatia mostly belonged to the Western Roman Empire.²⁴ Nonetheless, there are repercussions on the later Croatian culture, in the strong Latinisation of this territory, especially in its most accessible region: Dalmatia. This would be inherited chiefly by the Croatian settlers, although this would not be a crucial factor.²⁵ On the other hand, the later Byzantine role (after 476) will be important as well.

After the dissolution of the Western Roman Empire, the Croats arrived to their new homeland under the Eastern Roman Empire or Byzantium Empire. Although the territory of Croatia today was heavily Latinised, and the Croats accepted the Latin culture (the oldest monuments mentioning the name of Croatia and its rulers were written in Latin in the Latin script, although this could be a Carolingian influence), the early medieval Croatian culture was not completely based on the Latin culture and Latin script. In the cultural sense, it was not completely part of the West or Western European culture²⁶ (in fact, Croatian settlers adopted a mixed culture, Latin-Greek, from the old antiquity period, or extended old antiquity period). Due to the later powerful Byzantium Empire and its influence over a wider space, the territory of today's Croatia was in the zone of Byzantium influence, and some parts of Croatia were under Byzantine rule (for a shorter or longer term). The most visible Byzantine influence, and subsequent Eastern European features (since in that period there was no division into East-West) were perhaps the Glagolitic and Cyrillic scripts (although the latter was not in use in Croatia before the Great Schism, according to conserved texts). It is known that all other Slavic Catholic peoples abandoned the use of Glagolitic script very early on, nearly at the beginning. The Glagolitic script was invented by a Greek: Konstantin Cyril,²⁷ and the Cyrillic script stemmed from the Greek uncial script (believed to have been invented by pupils of Konstantin Cyril) and linked to Orthodoxy. There are, of course, more Byzantine influences in the Croatian medieval culture (in law, written heritage, church offices, toponomastics). The strength of the Byzantine influence in Croatian culture was testified by the following: the Croats received Christianity from that direction, at least in part.

However, later Latin (and western European) culture prevailed, although it was dominant early on and certainly after the Great Schism.²⁸ Nonetheless, these elements were characteristic of the eastern European culture, but not in the sense of East-West

²³ In the East/West sense. Mrduljaš (2007) has a similar opinion.

²⁴ Until 437, and to the Eastern Roman Empire from 437 to 476, with the independence of Dalmatia from 454. That Dalmatia occupied a greater area than the present-day region, nearly half of present-day Croatia.

²⁵ The perception of the common people differs than that of the academic world. In this sense, I heard from a student (from a western European country where Latin is the parent language) that Western Europe (or Western European culture) is the whole space which once belonged to the Western Roman Empire. I mention this as a curiosity.

²⁶ From today's perspective.

²⁷ This is considered the most plausible opinion.

²⁸ For the previous see "Bizant" in: *Hrvatska enciklopedija*; Bratulić 2007; Bratulić; Damjanović 2005

division, with the exception of Cyrillic script, which was later linked to Orthodoxy at the official level.

This zero or proto-division is related causative-consequentially to the first European concept of East-West.

1.2 First division

The first European division into East-West was made after the Great Schism in 1054, when Europe was divided religiously, politically and culturally into the West (Catholic) and East (Orthodox). This was a medieval division that would be maintained until 1945,²⁹ and serve as a basis since other factors would appear later.

These other factors are the appearance of the middle class (more significantly) or bourgeoisie, that would drive change (predominantly technological and scientific) in western Europe, and as a rising class would dethrone the aristocracy as the dominant class, resulting in capitalism. The latter is a notable feature of western European countries. The middle class or bourgeoisie, and free professions were non-existent or almost non-existent in Turkish Europe and Orthodox Europe (appearing late in Russia, in the 19th century). The appearance of the middle class is linked tightly to the Renaissance, emerging in that period in accordance with the historical, social and cultural changes that occurred. J. Burckhardt (1860), who was first to define the notion of the Renaissance, together with J. Michelet, acknowledged for the theoretical conception of the notion. He considered the Renaissance to be a key factor in shaping western culture based on topics of this world and laicism.³⁰ With all these changes, a novelty would be introduced into society: the ability to more easily progress from a lower class to a higher class.

Another factor that marked western Europe in that period was popular language, which began to be introduced into use, after the medieval use of Latin, in the public and higher spheres (as the language of culture, significantly or completely). This was not limited only to Romance language countries, but also occurred in England.³¹ On the other side in Eastern Europe, a number of Old Church Slavonic was in use earlier, or Old Greek in Greece. There, popular language did not begin to substitute for these languages.³²

Another factor that marked western Europe (more precisely western and northern Europe) was Protestantism, emerging in Germany, Switzerland, France,³³ but also in England (with different motives) and Czechia³⁴ (considered to be an Eastern European country), before spreading around Europe.

²⁹ See, for example, Kundera's essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe" claiming the same for the Czech, as claimed by Croats.

³⁰ See "Renesansa" in: *Hrvatska enciklopedija*; Burckhardt 1997

³¹ Latin and French were more prestigious than English in the Middle Ages. French "became a major language of administration, education, literature and law in England", Grange: <https://www.humanities.ox.ac.uk/article/medieval-britain-if-you-wanted-get-ahead-you-had-speak-french>; see also Suggett 1946.

³² For example, in Serbia Old Church Slavonic was in general use until the 19th c. (Ivić 1994)

³³ According to the origin of the reformers: Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and Jean Calvin, see Boisset 1985 or Dunstan 1962.

³⁴ Jan Hus and his church; it is possible to call it a proto-protestant as well.

However, the nature of these characteristics (middle class, Renaissance, Protestantism, popular language, industrial revolution) is social and cultural instead of religious or ideological. The exception was the division into Catholicism-Orthodoxy; even Protestantism is more of a social and/or cultural feature than religious, in accordance with the tendencies or ideas expressed in the Renaissance. Despite the wars among Catholics and Protestants, there was no formal division, with both groups functioning within the same society. Religion and ideology tend to be the basis for deeper formal divisions, as expressed in the Introduction, as seen multiple times throughout history. On the other hand, it was precisely some of these characteristics (industrial revolution, the middle class as a driver of economic progress and development) that served the Enlightenment's philosophers to create Eastern Europe on that basis. All these elements, among others, will serve to situate Croatia either within the Western European or Eastern European, or Balkan spheres or cultures.

1.3 Second division

The model of the division into European West and East based on Catholicism and Orthodoxy, and the culture related to it in a broader sense, or spread in this way, was maintained until the mid-20th century, due to the ongoing significance of religion in the cultural, ideological and identification sense. A shift towards atheism took place later, and did not imply a cultural factor that would erase that type of culture. But already in the 18th century, a new division began to form, and slowly expanded through the 19th and 20th centuries, as the invention of Eastern Europe by the Enlightenment's philosophers and writers, as Wolff indicated.³⁵

The second concept of European East-West arose after 1945. After World War II, Europe was ideologically (and politically) divided, between Capitalism in the West and Communism in the East, as two opposite worlds. In addition to the ideological division, these worlds also faced other types of divisions (both political and social: multiparty system – one-party system, more democracy – less democracy, etc.). Taking these differences of a deeper nature into consideration, the division was justified.

1.4 A third division?

Is it possible to talk of a third division? If it is not possible to talk about it, it exists in practice. The third division into European East-West came into existence in 1990, with the dissolution of the Communist block and totalitarian regimes in the European East, and continues to this day. On the one hand, this continues the division into the Capitalist block and Communist block (although no longer formally). In the early 1990s, there were some social differences (less democracy, undeveloped multiparty system, less plurality of expression, etc.), which were later more or less evened out. On the other hand, the main reason was economic power, and a division on this basis is a prolonged division made by the Enlightenment's thinkers and writers, as detected by Wolff (1994).

³⁵ Novak (2009) moves the beginnings of this division to the Renaissance, though economic prosperity was not yet achieved. An echo of that 18th c. idea of the backwardness of eastern Europe, is visible in the 19th c. in a poem by the Croatian writer August Šenoa: *Kakvu Hrvati jedu djecu* (The kinds of children Croats eat), as an answer to such perceptions.

The first problem is that a division based on economic power cannot be relevant, since this kind of division is not based on the ideological, religious, or cultural factors that provoked the deep and true divisions of the past. Such a division is unfounded, and not based on any concept. Given this, the east-west division of this kind should not be written with capital letters. The justification cannot be that we live in a free world, an economic world and a consumer society where the differences have been levelled out, leaving perhaps the most prominent justification: economic power. A second problem is that an ex-communist country in the 1990s would be poorer, though this that has changed substantially, e.g., Czech Republic and Slovenia are now more developed than Portugal, though Slovenia and Czech Republic are only insignificantly less developed than Spain, according to the GDP per capita in 2023.³⁶ If this criterion was strictly implemented, then Portugal, Spain (or even Ireland 30 years ago) would be excluded from the European West (with a capital letter). The extenuating circumstances are that these countries are geographically west, and that they belonged to Western Europe in the previous division, based on Capitalism.

2. The Balkan concept

The Balkan concept started to be forged after the Turkish invasion and their occupation of Southeastern Europe. Turks are the crucial factor in shaping this concept. Although Todorova mentions two factors: the Byzantine and Turkish,³⁷ the former is only a feature and has no importance in the emergence and shaping of the concept. It is secondary, although more important than other phenomena, such as the *gusle*³⁸ (with debate on whether this instrument is of proto-Balkan or old Slavic origin)³⁹ or the roasting of a pig or lamb on a spit. That the Byzantine factor is a secondary feature is visible in this: some territories are considered Balkan despite the low level of Byzantine influence (even by Todorova). Without the Turks, there would be no Balkans (in the cultural sense).⁴⁰ Not only did they give rise to the name (though this is not relevant for the issue): in Turkish, the word *Balkan* means ‘steep mountain range cover with forest’,⁴¹ but they left elements of common culture at various levels. These elements on the Balkan particular grounds (including people) resulted, at the end, in their particular features. It is known that cultural regions share both cultural elements and geographical features (at least some), and the Balkans are no exception. Other cultural regions share them as well, such as the Central Europe plain (from the Ukraine to Romania, across Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia and Austria, among others). On the other hand, it is known that empires not only favour the dissemination of elements of a particular culture or cultural region, but they spread them consciously and intentionally. In fact, we can state that empires are crucial for shaping cultural regions: (the Austro-Hungarian Empire for Central Europe, the Ottoman Empire for the Balkans, the (Great) British Empire for

³⁶ <https://data.worldbank.org/country>

³⁷ *Imagining the Balkans*, 2009: 10.

³⁸ ‘(one-string) rebec’, ‘two-stringed fiddle’

³⁹ The most pronounced theories of origin, at least in Croatia (<https://hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gusle>; Čaleta 2012). According to Kuhač 1877, the *gusle* is of Slavic origin, although with no exclusive proof. The Illyrian (proto-Balkan) theory seems a myth. However, it is possibly of oriental origin (Čaleta 2012).

⁴⁰ That the Balkans are a result of the long Turkish rule, as shown by Todorova (2009: 12), although less explicitly.

⁴¹ Skok 1971; see Todorova 2009 for more detailed meanings.

Great Britain and Ireland,⁴² the Russian Empire for eastern Europe and Asia).⁴³ This is even more clear in the case of the Balkans, i.e., the Ottoman Empire, in comparison with the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Central European culture. This is because the Balkans were occupied (by force) by the Turks. It is about the dissemination of elements of their own culture within the territory under their rule, with the aim to ingrain these elements. This is why the Balkans as a cultural region were shaped later (see below). In conclusion, cultural regions are shaped on the basis of geographical and cultural features.

Although the Balkans existed as a geographical space before the arrival of the Turks, they did not exist culturally in this sense (or geographically as a notion). The concept of the Balkans began under Turkish rule. The Balkans start developing and coming into existence in the 19th century after the liberation of certain territories from Turkish domination. The creation of the Balkan concept (in the cultural and political sense) was completed in the 20th century by the Balkan wars and after the Turks left the Balkans. Until then, the Balkan and Oriental coexisted as a form of the latter, and in a form of the other (as outer form and manifestation), in the way E. Said sees Orientalism, not only because the space belonged to Turkey, but because life, or the way of life, was more or less identical. If we read I. Andrić, we will see an oriental world in a Balkan territory, in general (or even B. Stanković where he writes about the Turkish period). If we think this is fiction, and that these writers were born after the withdrawal of the Turks, we can take Matija Mažuranić and his travel guide *Pogled u Bosnu* (1842),⁴⁴ and we will be able to observe that this is more the Orient than the Balkans.⁴⁵ According to this, the Balkans would be the youngest shaped European cultural region.⁴⁶ However, this does not mean it did not develop later, nor that the shaping of the Balkan identity ended then.

The name itself (Balkans) initially (until the 19th century) signified only the mountain between Bulgaria and Serbia, and Romania, called *Stara planina* in Bulgarian (still in use, as the Balkans as well), and the ancient *Haemus* (*Aemus*), which was more frequent until the 1820s.⁴⁷ Todorova claims that the name was erroneously assigned to the Dinaric Alps, because of the incorrect claims that Haemus began at the Bay of Venice and ended in the Black Sea, i.e., linking the Adriatic and Black Seas, “with a dominant position in the peninsula”. This was repeated during history, for two thousand years, in one way or another.⁴⁸

⁴² I would like to note here that there is no official name for this cultural region or geographical region.

⁴³ Although other factors or characteristics are also important, e.g., Central Europe includes the space where Germans historically lived or moved through. I doubt this is a coincidence. Tomas and Kardum (2025: 17-18) claim that there are several concepts, ideas of Central Europe, depending on the origin, among others: a German one and a Slavic and Hungarian one, and the Germans geopolitical concepts consider “Central Europe as the space of expansion of German political and cultural domination”. The same opinion was given by Gauss (1994), an Austrian writer. However, what was said is a fact.

⁴⁴ *A View into Bosnia*

⁴⁵ Todorova (2009: 12-13) implicitly says that the Balkans were forming from the end of the Turkish rule (18th - 19th c.) to the end of the WW I, and that the Ottoman legacy later was “invented and reinvented” regarding its self-identity. Wolff (1994) calls the Ottoman Empire in Europe explicitly Orient, of course, in accordance with the Enlightenment terminology, where Eastern Europe should be a transitional space between the West and the Orient.

⁴⁶ However, it remains a doubt regarding today's Great Britain and Ireland. Was this region, with no name, already shaped prior to Ireland's independence? There, I think, the same factors do not apply.

⁴⁷ See Todorova 2009: 22, and further; *Hrvatska enciklopedija s.v. Balkan*

⁴⁸ 2009: 25, and farther

In the sense of the peninsula, the name Balkans was first coined by German geographer August Zeune in 1808. He simply standardised what had earlier existed in the wrong perception, attaching himself to that opinion. “It was the erroneous belief of the Balkan Mountains as the northern frontier of the peninsula that inspired Zeune to name it Balkan”.⁴⁹ It was in the mid-19th century that this name started being applied by more authors than the other denominations for the same. Until “the Congress of Berlin in 1878, the most often used designations were [...] ‘European Turkey’, ‘Turkey-in-Europe’, ‘European Ottoman Empire’, ‘European Levant’, ‘Oriental Peninsula’”. And for the Ottomans the common geographical designation was *Rum-eli* ‘the land of the Romans (Greeks)’.⁵⁰

The Balkans are not only a geographical and cultural notion, in the sense of a cultural region (made by the mixing of geographical and cultural factors), but they were also concretised in a pure geographical notion – the *Balkan Peninsula*. Geographical zones should have clear borders in comparison with cultural regions, which are social appearances and, as such, appear in continuum (though less than natural appearances), with no clear borders. The problem is the Balkan peninsula borders do not coincide with the borders of the Balkans as a cultural region, or are exaggerated.

Thus, the Balkans exist as a geographical notion,⁵¹ geopolitical notion and cultural region (although always on the same basis). On the other hand, there are different divisions as to what the Balkans include. For example, some divisions include Croatia and Slovenia (*Hrvatska enciklopedija*, s.v. *Balkan*; Todorova 2009: 30, 31),⁵² some authors even include Hungary, or Turkey (at least its European part), or exclude Romania (Todorova 2009: 29). In the case of Hungary, which in part was also part of European Turkey, other factors intervene, such as the geographical one, since there are no mountains (to the south). The same regards Slavonia (a region in Croatia), which does not belong to the Balkans but instead to Central Europe.⁵³ What draws attention is Todorova’s criterion or classification, which excludes Slovenia but includes Croatia. Her argument is that Croatia’s territory was “under Ottoman rule for considerable lengths of time”. This is not incorrect, though the word “considerable” is vague, and could cause confusion. The truth is that some Croatian territories were occupied by Turks for a shorter or longer period, but this period was on average 150 years and did not exceed 200 years,⁵⁴ although some areas were occupied for 100 years or less (such

⁴⁹ Todorova 2009: 25-26

⁵⁰ Todorova 2009: 27. In 1893, in order to correct Zeune’s error, the German geographer Theobald Fischer proposed the name *Südoesteuropa*. (Todorova 2009: 28). This is a frequent geopolitical term in use today.

⁵¹ In two forms, as a mountain range and the Balkan Peninsula.

⁵² That is the common, geographical, approach for Todorova. On the other hand, Todorova does not deny the Slovenians’ and Croats’ western self-consideration, and the same is claimed by the Hungarians (Todorova 2009: 30)

⁵³ On the other hand, there are different divisions that include Central Europe, with Croatia and without it, etc. See, for example, these maps: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Regions_of_Europe_Map.png; <https://climate-adapt.eea.europa.eu/en/countries-regions/transnational-regions/central-europe>; https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/casestudy/media/nic01_ceuromap.html; <https://geohistory.today/europe-divisions-and-unifications/>.

⁵⁴ In fact, less. The first Croatian areas were occupied by Turks at the end of the 15th c. (Makarska and its surroundings), but the conquering did not begin until the 16th c., after 1522 (except Sinj which was occupied in 1514). All occupied territories ever were again part of Croatia in 1699 by the Treaty of Karlowitz, some even earlier (as Makarska which liberated from Turks in 1684, and free of them between 1646 and 1671 as well). Mažuran 1998; *Hrvatska enciklopedija* s.v. “Makarska”

as Moslavina).⁵⁵ This period of 100-200 years is not so considerable, given that other parts of the Balkans were under Ottoman rule for 500 or 600 years. However, what is particularly noteworthy is Todorova's inclusion of the Dubrovnik Republic in the Balkans. Her argument is that its territory was vassal, and "only nominally Ottoman", and "exerted such an important influence on the Balkan Peninsula that its history cannot be severed from the Balkans". The latter is quite doubtful. Although it is true that Dubrovnik was a vassal republic to a certain extent (paying for liberty, but not acting for Turks), its influence in the Balkans could not be the crucial argument, for two reasons. Firstly, there was no Turkish presence in the Dubrovnik Republic, or any Turkish cultural elements. Its culture is highly similar to the cultures of other Croatian towns in Dalmatia that were not occupied by Turks, but with local particularities. Secondly, the Republic of Venice also exerted its significant influence (even more significant) in the Balkans. Therefore, her claim is not plausible.

3. Croatia's western elements and Balkan elements

3.1 Western elements

In the first chapter (1.2), I outlined the characteristics or elements of the West and/or western European culture, especially those emerging with Modernity (changing or developing of form). This is the essence of today's western societies, spreading and being spread from the European east to the Far East. I will consider them now, as well as Balkan characteristics, trying to decipher their role in creating the Croatian profile.

The first feature is Catholicism, in the period when Europe was truly divided into East and West. As stated in the first chapter, the division into European East-West based on the religion was maintained until 1945. This is not solely my opinion, as Kundera shows in his famous essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe" (1984).⁵⁶ Therefore, Croatia belonged to the European West (at least once).

Other elements of the West or western European culture (middle class, Renaissance, popular language, Protestantism, industrial revolution) arise more or less in the Renaissance, at the beginning of Modernity. The Renaissance is very important in the cultural sense (not to say as a civilisation, a word misused by the western European philosophers, writers and cartographers, starting from the 18th century,⁵⁷ and it is also a word that serves to exaggerate the "importance" of the Renaissance in our world). It is a turning point, in which new life models were grounded, new social relations were created, with the development of science and technology and the development of individualism, and it forms the foundation of the society we live in. It is about Modernity, which started in the Renaissance and continues still (the same attitude toward humans and their world). The Renaissance arose in Italy before spreading to

⁵⁵ This Croatian microregion was occupied for 40-50 years, see *Hrvatska enciklopedija* s.v. "Moslavina", Pavličević 2001.

⁵⁶ "Geographic Europe' (extending from the Atlantic to the Ural Mountains) was always divided into two halves which evolved separately: one tied to ancient Rome and the Catholic Church, the other anchored in Byzantium and the Orthodox Church. After 1945, the border between the two Europes shifted several hundred kilometers to the west, and several nations that had always considered themselves to be Western woke up to discover that they were now in the East." (1984: 33)

⁵⁷ See Wolff, 1994; indicated also by Mac Sweeney in 2023.

other countries. Although in the Renaissance the division into backward and progressive countries was aligned by South-North⁵⁸ (in fact, it was Italy who made this division), the Renaissance also flourished in other European countries. However, it failed to spread throughout the European east (and did not appear in all western European countries).⁵⁹ The Renaissance in Croatia was quite substantial (various circles; literature, writers corresponding among themselves; painting; architecture; press).⁶⁰

The middle class arose already in the Middle Ages, but more systematically and typically in the Renaissance (which would later be converted to the bourgeoisie). In Eastern Europe, an Orthodox Renaissance appeared very late, for example in Russia in the 19th century.⁶¹ It was absent in the Balkans, being under Turkish rule and ruled by a (centralised) feudal system (timar system) until 1831.⁶² The best example of the Croatian Renaissance middle class could be the Dubrovnik merchants, with the middle class also appearing in other Croatian towns. All “free professions” belonged to the middle class. Marko Marulić was a judge and procurator, as was Barne Karnarutić (both Croatian Renaissance writers),⁶³ while Juraj Dalmatinac was a Croatian Renaissance sculptor and builder, and Mikša Pelegrinović was a notary, judge and Croatian Renaissance poet, etc.

Bubrin (2013) draws attention to the fact that the Croatian and Bohemian, Polish and Hungarian Renaissances are disregarded in the scholarship on the Renaissance “in the West”. In general, Western scholars do not cross the (“traditional”) border of “the West”, which is Venice, to the South, and the Nuremberg-Leipzig-Wittenberg axis to the east. This shows, on the one hand, that the Renaissance as a criterion of westernness is appropriate, while on the other that this disregard has to do with the concept of the West on the western side of that border. The Renaissance is quite important for contemporary society, i.e., western European society, not only in the cultural sense, but as a basis of capitalism (as reflected in today's East-West division based on economic power), technology, development of science, progress (or what led to progress, a notion that remains important). As previously indicated, this will form a “civilisation”, a word which will be applied (according to Wolff 1994) in the 18th century by Enlightenment philosophers, writers and cartographers to differentiate Western from Eastern Europe in inventing Eastern Europe.⁶⁴ However, the Renaissance in the latter sense (more in the economic and social sense than a cultural paradigm) is quite doubtful (as progress). It contains negative features and consequences, not only in the Renaissance period, but still nowadays, which has been very well depicted by Sabato (an Argentinian writer and scientist) in his brilliant essay *Hombres y engranajes*.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the border indicated by Bubrin coincides, more or less, with the border of Wolff (in the Enlightenment period), and the latter with the Cold War border: Stettin to the East, and

⁵⁸ Wolff 1994: 357

⁵⁹ In eastern Europe, it appeared significantly in Poland, Hungary, Czechia and Croatia. Bubrin 2013; Novak 2009

⁶⁰ As well as in Hungary, Czechia and Poland.

⁶¹ See, for example, Smith 2017

⁶² The feudal system was retained until the end of the Ottoman Empire. See, for example, Matuz 1982. However, that does not imply there was no middle class to a lesser extent, and of Turkish type, earlier.

⁶³ Marko Marulić was a humanistic and Renaissance writer, known and read across Western Europe, a Renaissance correspondent, and his environment, education, and topics, were completely Western European. For that reason, his inclusion in the module *Conformación de la identidad balcánica* at the University of Buenos Aires is unusual.

⁶⁴ Novak (2009) states that in the Middle Ages, Byzantines considered the West to be barbarians.

⁶⁵ *Men and Gears*; see, also, “Renesansa” in: *Hrvatska enciklopedija*

Trieste to the South. Thus, what is (was) Western Europe is dependent on the point of view, which can be biased.

Popular language is another characteristic of the western European world. Whilst in eastern Europe Old Church Slavonic or Old Greek was in use in the higher spheres, as the language of culture, in the West popular language was in use, more obviously from the Renaissance period. Popular language in Croatia becomes the language of literature, of law, etc., and the language of culture early on in the Middle Ages (from the 12th century), earlier than in some western European countries. This is already evident in part in the *Bašćanska ploča* (Baška tablet), around 1100, an important document of Croatian history. This text shows mixed features of Old Church Slavonic and (old) Croatian.⁶⁶ Later these elements (of popular language) increases. As is known, in the 14th century, the first Croatian literary language⁶⁷ (Chakavian) penetrates all fields, with an internal stylistic stratification: the style of legal documents, town statutes, monastic codices or lawbooks, poetic and prosaic styles).⁶⁸

Protestantism could be another factor. It emerged in the 16th century and is linked to the Renaissance in the broader sense,⁶⁹ as a reflection of the same libertine ideas. Reformed churches arose in western Europe (Germany, Switzerland, France) in the strict sense. But they spread also to other western European countries (or which were considered as such during a phase of their history), which had their national protestant movement as the followers of the previous: Netherland, France, Belgium, Austria, Scotland, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Czechia, Hungary, Iceland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland,⁷⁰ Croatia and Slovenia, Romania,⁷¹ and Spain, a bit in Italy.⁷² Beside the three (western European) nuclei of Protestantism, it emerged earlier in Czechia in the 15th century as a form of proto-Protestantism (Protestantism in the broader sense): the Hussites, after their leader Jan Hus. In Croatia, there was a small, national protestant movement in the west (and north) that never took root, but featured one of the most important persons in the history of Lutheranism: Matija Vlačić Ilirik (Matthias Flacius Illyricus in Latin). This movement had an education policy,⁷³ an idea/conception of Croatian standard language, and more.⁷⁴

Taking into consideration these elements, factors (though perhaps less with respect to Protestantism; nonetheless, some western European countries are not better, Spain, Italy, etc.), Croatia would belong to western Europe.⁷⁵ One could claim that the quantity of several of these elements (e.g., middle class, industrial revolution) is not to the level as elsewhere in western Europe or it might be scarce. However, this concerns only one or two elements. Second, in the periphery, the quantity of a feature, or its prominence, is usually not pronounced. We could consider Croatia in this sense as the periphery of

⁶⁶ See Damjanović 1990

⁶⁷ There were three literary languages in use in Croatia till the 19th c., when one of them was standardised.

⁶⁸ Lončarić; Kekez 2007: 69

⁶⁹ See, for example, Boisset 1985

⁷⁰ These five countries belong to north Europe or the Nordic countries, but in the broader sense, economic power or wealth, they are often considered western European countries. See farther on that.

⁷¹ As part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

⁷² "Protestantizam" in: *Hrvatska enciklopedija*; "Reformacija" in: <https://hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reformacija>

⁷³ For both children and adults.

⁷⁴ Bratulić 2007; Bratulić 2011; Oczkova 2010

⁷⁵ Or Western Europe. I use the lower case given that it is not about deeper factors for division. On the other hand, Croatia seems closer to the European west than to the European east. See Pavličević 1996

the western European world, although these (periphery, quantity) were the items that motivated the Enlightenment philosophers and writers to create Eastern Europe.⁷⁶ The fact is though these differences existed, they were insufficient to split what was once one zone into two, on the basis of economic power and quantity or development of those cultural and social factors.⁷⁷ Third, the less development of culture and the less developed social factors, in comparison to western Europe, have an explanation. Croatia was long menaced by Turks and their invasion, and was forced to allocate most of its revenues to defence, while its population had no space or time to dedicate themselves to culture under the constant Turkish threats, fear, incursions, robbery and fire in the bordering zones (with many people emigrating to Italy, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary). However, this cannot be justification for everything. Taking into account only economic power and the factors that drive it, then some western European countries would not be considered part of this kind of Western Europe during certain periods of their history, particularly Portugal, Spain, and Ireland.

3.2 Balkan elements

On the other hand, if we take a look at Balkan elements in the Croatian culture (literature, visual arts, architecture), they are almost non-existent or very rare until the 20th century. For example, in literature, the first (and the only) prominent element did not appear until the 18th century, with *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga* (A Pleasant Conversation of the Slavic People) by the Franciscan friar Andrija Kačić Miošić. A question could arise why this book would be of Balkan elements. The anti-Turkish theme is not necessarily Balkan, as can be evidenced by this kind of theme appearing in the 15th century, including various genres, with some works even written in Latin (Nikola Modruški, Marulić, Črnko, Karnarutić, etc.). The type of verse (epic decasyllable), should not be considered Balkan by default, although it does not exist in the Kajkavian dialect,⁷⁸ though it is shared with the Serbian. The singing style that appeared in the territories occupied by Turks and bordering zones could be considered Balkan, unlike the *bugarščice* (old Croatian songs of long verse), a different (archaic) style of singing about battling the Turks, not only because of the lyric ballad tone. Also, an image of an old man, a *rhapsode*, who sings playing the one-string rebec evokes the Balkan world (although the instrument itself is only secondarily Balkan).⁷⁹ So, while the topic is not Balkan necessarily, neither is the whole work Balkan (thematizing other historical events as well). Kačić's work was intentionally oriented toward the South Slavic and other neighbouring countries, expressing solidarity with other peoples under Turkish oppression. The tale was told from the perspective of those suffering Turkish occupation, from the point of view of a person who is very close to them if not one of them. Some of the above is also reflected in the motives (persons, events, etc.; persons are, for example, Croatians, Serbs, Albanians), and the (shared) lexis. In the 18th century, some parts of Ivan Lovrić's work can also be considered as Balkan (*Osservazioni di*

⁷⁶ See Wolff, 1994

⁷⁷ Neither Wolff denies there were differences in the eastern part of Europe regarding the western part, but they were used, or misused, to create an artificial construct, with purpose (see Wolff 1994, "Conclusion").

⁷⁸ One of the Croatian neighbouring groups of dialects, not shared with the Serbs. See Kekez 1986

⁷⁹ *gusle*: mentioned previously.

Giovanni Lovrich sopra diversi pezzi del Viaggio in Dalmazia del signor abate Alberto Fortis coll'aggiunta della vita di Sočivica), though is not fiction, as the life of the anti-Turkish brigand Stanislav Sočivica. On the other hand, Ivan Mažuranić's *Smrt Smail-age Čengića* (*The Death of Smail-aga Čengić*) did not derive directly from the author's environment and surroundings, or by the events or by the topic (in the strict sense), or by the language or expressions of his environment. Thus, it is about a work of art, art (and artificial) construction, with a specifically chosen topic, and the whole work was elevated to a level of symbolism. Its models are *Osman*⁸⁰ by Baroque writer Ivan Gundulić and the classical literature. Nonetheless, its model is partially Kačić as well, influenced by his imitation of popular and folk literature, of what Mažuranić read and listened to in childhood.⁸¹ This work could be considered Balkan only in a broader sense; if there would be more works, books of this kind, but, unfortunately, that is not the case. After Kačić, Balkan elements in the (written) literature are rare and sporadic. These elements in the 19th century usually appear as the influences of Kačić's book or folk epic poetry (for example, in Botić, imitating both; the poetry and work of Despot, who positioned himself in the Balkans, are not Balkan despite featuring Balkan elements, while in other authors Balkan elements are generally marginal).⁸² It should be considered that Balkan elements are not the same or equal everywhere, and especially not of the same intensity. In this way, Balkan customs are rarer and of less intensity in the western periphery, precisely because it was much less under Ottoman influence.⁸³

Thus, Croatia's culture is predominantly Western European, but only regarding high culture or art production and styles. As indicated earlier: the Turks were the crucial factor in shaping the Balkan culture. So, it is quite clear that Balkan elements would be present, since parts of present day Croatia were occupied temporarily by the Turks. If considering other aspects of culture, especially, the folk culture (customs, music, etc.),⁸⁴ or the culinary, even everyday life, there are many more Balkan elements, although Croatia (still) remains peripheral. On the other hand, Croatian culture is of western European type only if we consider high culture and the present day territory. But if we look at Bosnia and Herzegovina, the facts are different. And they are even more different if we take into consideration Croatian Muslims, whose literature was written in Croatian though sometimes in the Arabic script, or in the Croatian Cyrillic script (in use in Bosnia by Croat Catholics and Muslims), and also in the Latin script. This was also part of the Croatian culture (according to Bosnian Muslims themselves).⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Thematising the end of a Turkish tyrant as well.

⁸¹ Frangeš 1987.

⁸² These two authors are not central literary figures in the 19th century, on the contrary, but in the central personalities there are no Balkan elements, or they are quite peripheral.

⁸³ Todorova (2009: 31) does not deny that "some regions are more Balkan than others".

⁸⁴ Todorova (2009: 12-13) indirectly makes a distinction between two types of Turkish influences: in politics, (high) culture, economy, of social type, and in "the demographic sphere and the sphere of popular culture". The second is more persistent and continuous. But what Todorova does not mention is that the first is found, generally, in the pure Balkans, and not, for example, in Croatia, only perhaps at microlevels. Therefore, the distinction should be made between the Balkans in the narrow sense, and in the broader sense. In the former, the Turkish influence is not only greater but also wider (affecting more areas).

⁸⁵ For example, "Chirvat türkisi" (Croatian poem) written in Arabic script in the 16th c. by Mehmed Erdeljac; Kreševljaković 1912; Hadžijahić 1938; or Kurt 1902.

Croatia expressly started to be part of the Balkans in the state and political sense, and, consequently, in the socio-political sense, during its membership of Yugoslavia for some 70 years. Given that the majority of Yugoslavia was in the Balkans, both geographically and culturally, the country as a whole was positioned in this way. Furthermore, during the second or communist Yugoslavia, the state was positioned ideologically in the Balkans as well, in an anti-colonial or, at least, anti-imperialist sense. The Balkans were opposed to imperialist Europe (Germans, Italians, etc.).⁸⁶ During this 70-year period, the areas that did not belong to the Balkans geographically nor culturally suffered an acculturation, because the country was expressly defined as Balkan. This was more prominent in the second Yugoslavia, not only because of its longer duration, but also because transport means were more developed and accessible, and affordable, and the significant growth of literacy and the media precipitated acculturation, not only officially, but also by diffusing music and cultural patterns, even words or lexis, of Balkan (usually Turkish) origin. On the other hand, an acculturation from below also occurred. Croatia (parts) and Slovenia were the only two republics that did not culturally belong to the Balkans. Among them, in my opinion, Croatia, i.e., Zagreb as the most urbanised and industrialised city, suffered greater acculturation, by settlers from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Macedonia. The key factor was the language (even for Macedonians, as Croato-Serbian was obligatory for all).

4. Examples of the Division East-West from the Czech and Polish Perspective

It appears that the Czech and Polish cases are similar to that of Croatia. From 1945, Czechia (Czechoslovakia) and Poland belong to Eastern Europe due to their Communist reality. After 1990, they continue to be in the same group since the division remains, based now on economic power as engendered in the Enlightenment period. Milan Kundera in his essay “The Tragedy of Central Europe” finds the same factors (criteria) of belonging to Western Europe for Czechia, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia,⁸⁷ as those of our ancestors: the Catholic world and Rome opposed to the Orthodox world and Byzantium. After 1945, “the border between the two Europes shifted several hundreds kilometres to the west, and several nations that had always considered themselves to be western woke up to discover that they were now in the East.”⁸⁸ Kundera refers to this territory, these countries, as the *kidnapped West*.⁸⁹

Further, Kundera addressed an additional problem arising from this situation: the notion of Central Europe (between Eastern and Western Europe) reduced to these

⁸⁶ In fact, the communist orientation toward the Balkans took place early on, even before the establishment of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. South Slavic communism reflected on a Balkan federation to include all South Slavic countries (including Bulgaria), Greece, Rumania and Albania. (Gužvica 2021) This idea was maintained until the end of WWII (Dedijer 1949: 94; Matković 1998: 291), although Dedijer refers to confederation.

⁸⁷ “the word ‘Europe’ does not represent a phenomenon of geography but a spiritual notions synonymous with the word ‘West,’” 1984: 33.

⁸⁸ Kundera 1984: 33. According to Tomas and Kardum, the same sentiment of belonging was/is felt by the Hungarians, Poles and Slovaks (2025: 7).

⁸⁹ In another context, Kundera quotes T. Masaryk (1895): “The Czechs are not next to the East (they are surrounded by Germans and Poles, that is, the West) ...”, i.e., that Czechs are not mediators between the East and the West (1984: 34), the idea allocated to Central Europe, see Kundera.

mentioned countries, which lies culturally in the West and politically in the East, but excluding Austria.⁹⁰

A further issue in Kundera's essay has similarities with Croatia. It describes a nostalgia for the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and in this sense his essay is reminiscent of the book of the same name (*The Tragedy of Central Europe*) published in 1923 by an English author, Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett. In the latter, nostalgia is expressed because of unpredictable political circumstances and unstable surroundings in which this space lies, i.e., negative consequences of the breakup of that space. His nostalgia is not only cultural and economical, but also geopolitical and strategic. Kundera's nostalgia is due to a better organised country, culturally important as a nucleus of the Central European culture, which has strength in comparison to other spaces, towards both East and West and, of course, for being Kundera's area within this country part of the West undoubtedly. Thus, in Kundera's essay, an Austro-Hungarian nostalgia is observable. In Croatia, this kind of nostalgia also exists, although little is known about it. Some people and the media refer to Yugonostalgia, but there is also an Austro-Hungarian nostalgia, as a counterpart to the former, though it is usually less expressed. This kind of nostalgia is far less present in the media. However, I have heard it several times, from common people of different geographical origins, and once on television (from a right-wing political and/or cultural worker). Arguments in its favour are that the Austro-Hungarian Empire was a good country, organised, etc. (similar to Kundera's vision).⁹¹ Nostalgia was alluded to by the Austrian writer Karl-Markus Gauss in his collection *Die Vernichtung Mitteleuropas* (1991), claiming that contemporary Croatian (and Hungarian and Polish) writers see the Austro-Hungarian Empire as far better than it was (a *false* and *uncritical* vision according to him).⁹² In this sense, the Croatian identity is conflicted and divided: those who cherish the Austro-Hungarian nostalgia see themselves as part of Western Europe and opt for it, while those who cherish Yugonostalgia opt for the Balkans in general.

The Polish example is similar. In Croatia, the national ideology is based on Catholicism and Christianity, not only as an identity, but especially related to the Turkish invasion, as it is referred to as the *Bulwark of Christendom* (implying sometimes to be part of Western Europe, or, at least, its shield), while in Polish contemporary prose, Poland is referred to as the "historical bulwark of the West".⁹³

According to the above, Croatia shares sentiments, attitudes, visions with other eastern European countries due to its belonging to the same country and a similar position, among others.

⁹⁰ 1984: 33, 36. In fact, this is the form of Central Europe presented to students in Trinity College Dublin, in general, though there are other approaches.

⁹¹ Though this, in fact, is a lie. It is well known that the Austro-Hungarian Empire at its end was rotten, corrupt, in decay (not only known from Hašek's and Krtleža's literary works, but in general; the Gauss' vision is close to that, far from ideal). On the other hand, this point is also valid (with different factors) for Yugoslavia or Yugonostalgia.

⁹² *Uništenje Srednje Europe* (1994: 21)

⁹³ One of the perceptions, Kaniewska 2018, although there is a perception of being between the East and the West, or Central European.

5. Conclusion

It could be observed that Croatia is both a Central European country and a Balkan country, and has been recognised as such (although not generally by the same people). The Balkans imply Eastern Europe, though the term Balkans has a range of connotations that are far more affective, and more negatively charged (than a pure geographical notion or the cultural region notion). On the other hand, Central Europe does not necessarily imply the West (anymore), as shown. The Balkan notion is subordinated to Eastern Europe to some extent, but it also exceeds its limits as a different category. The Balkans are another cultural and mental complex, considered more backward and inferior, with less “civilisation”, dirty, savage, and the (European) other, negative one, of course.⁹⁴ Croatia’s problem is not simply the Balkans versus Eastern Europe. It is not about Eastern Europe, given that the Balkans are a symbol (more than a notion and more than the meaning of Eastern Europe). Furthermore, the notion of Eastern Europe is also less important for Croats for the following reason: the notion of Eastern Europe is newer in use (since 1945), despite being coined in the 18th century (according to Wolff). Therefore, it reaches only newer generations in identifying themselves with it or in accepting this designation. That is, in Croatian identities, but also in the eyes of other peoples (from the West, European and the world), there remains the dichotomy of the West vs. the Balkans. In correlation with the above about the Balkans, the West has opposite values. No one compares the Balkans, Central Europe and the Mediterranean (which are all cultural regions), but the dichotomy of the West-Balkans is established, proving the Balkans are more than a cultural region. While other countries of the former Central Europe, according to Mikanowski (2023), run away from the negative connotations of the notion of Eastern Europe, forming new associations (Baltic States, new Central Europe), Croatia was more negatively marked as the Balkans. As opposed to the (earlier) West until 1918, the conviction among part of Croats, due to the state and social structure and official culture of the time was they were part of the West until that date, and they would now be again. Nowadays, living between three designations: the Balkans, Central Europe (that should be, or was, Western Europe) and Eastern Europe, Croats are more burdened and confused than their eastern European colleagues; lying between grandiose “Civilisation” (of western Europe) and the Balkan backwardness, the Eastern Europe notion sounds middle and even mild. However, a polarisation took place between two worlds: West-Balkans, which also passes through other categories: Austro-Hungarian nostalgia-Yugonostalgia, Right-Left. In other words, it contains not only cultural divisions, but ideological and political ones as well. The division in the Croatia society is massive, making it one of Europe’s most politically divided countries.

It can also be observed that Croatia’s situation is not monolithic, but is quite complex.⁹⁵ Croatia’s territory belongs to three cultural regions: Central Europe, the

⁹⁴ See, or cf., Todorova 2009, among others.

⁹⁵ The complexity of the Croatian situation, and the Croatian identity, is seen in a 2023 survey by the CEPER group from Austria, a firm specialised in market research. Ten countries positioned between Germany, Turkey and Russia were included in the survey on regional identity. Croats showed the most complexity: 36% considered themselves part of the Balkans, 26% part of Central Europe, 22% part of Western Europe, 9% part of Eastern Europe (and 7% answered “I don’t know”). Since these results are no longer available at <https://cepergroup.com/article/ceper-not-all-central-europeans-consider-themselves-central-europeans>, I refer to Tomas and Kardum (2025: 7-8). However, it is interesting that the Balkan identity showed the highest percentage.

Mediterranean and the Balkans.⁹⁶ Were Croatia a large country, this would be an advantage, but as a small country it becomes more of an obstacle. The problem is the world of science and/or persons who make classifications want to be able to position a whole country into a group, to be “complete” or precise. This is the way we used to look at the world. That’s why there are at least two classifications (Central Europe and Balkan). Another problem is mentioned above: the Balkans are more than a cultural region. Further, Croatia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until 1918. The question is whether this country belonged to the West or to the East. As observed in Czech, Polish, and Hungarian cases, it was part of the West. On the other hand, Austria is undoubtful in this sense even nowadays. Can the question be posed as: what kind of power was the Austro-Hungarian Empire: an Eastern one or a Western one? Exposing things in this way, the answer will be clear. So, if Croatia was (at least in this way, but as shown it was also in other ways) part of the Western Europe until 1918, how did it become Balkan in the meanwhile? Despite its Balkan features, it suffered a period of acculturation and underwent a repositioning (even self-repositioning) during the two Yugoslavias, especially the second one. This period is quite important for the establishment of divisions (both by science and the general public), for two reasons: the development of contemporary science (to avoid unfounded points), and the notable increase of literacy and development of the mass media. In other words, many scientific truths and visions were established during the 20th century (and it is not easy to change customs, visions, truths; neither for the establishers, nor the receivers). On the other hand, the common people were sufficiently educated and had access to the media to receive and retain such information. However, Croatia’s place can be suitably described as being both a periphery of Western Europe and as a periphery of the Balkans. That is, also, its misfortune.

As shown, Croatia was not unambiguously Western in the cultural and social sense during its history. Some of its important features of identity (even current) were received from the East, though after the Great Schism, the influence of Western culture prevailed. It received later a certain Turkish influence, although not from above since the entire country was never occupied as part of the Turkish Empire, but instead received it from below, i.e., from the common people, and as the frontier area. This is the reason why the Croatian Balkans is (s)lighter (in addition to the fact that parts of the occupied territory were occupied for less 200 years). Accordingly, there was no Ottoman influence in politics and economy (Croatia made its decisions on interior matters in its parliament and had suffrage in the Austro-Hungarian Empire). This is also one of the reasons why we encounter Balkan characteristics in the low (or lower) culture, and why Croatia already traced its path regarding the high culture before the arrival of Turks,⁹⁷ which later continued in unoccupied territory (with some crisis, in quantity, at the end of the 17th and in 18th centuries). However, as noted by Burke, *et alia* culture is not only the high culture (as earlier considered in the sciences and by the public), but it consists of all types of culture, including daily life and even the culture of behaviour. Regarding acculturation (though in the reverse direction), it is interesting how the behaviour of Croatian drivers towards pedestrians changed after its separation from Yugoslavia,

⁹⁶ Unfortunately, the Mediterranean as cultural region is rarely used, if at all, for divisions. This shows that other factors, supracultural ones, are supposed to be crucial in formation of cultural regions: empires.

⁹⁷ This is another reason why we do not see an Ottoman legacy, or only very scarcely, in high culture.

becoming more polite, slower, allowing them to cross the street (though Croatian drivers have still not caught up with some western European regions). The period of seventy years in Yugoslavia, however, shows that belonging to a cultural region can be changed from above (although in this sense this is an insignificant number of years).

With respect to the cultural and social spheres, Croatia is mostly of western European type, although the development of certain social features was somewhat scarce. I already mentioned the reason for that: the invasion of Turks resulted in less available resources for cultural activities, investments, and development, due to political and military instability). However, we should not blame the Turks for everything (as the Bulgarian do),⁹⁸ but we should be aware that it could have done more.

Apart from the fact that Croatia belonged/belongs to the Western European cultural circle, in a broader sense, it resembles Argentina. Nowadays, Argentina is not a developed country, nor is it perceived as such. But between the two world wars, Argentina had a GDP at the level of France or Germany,⁹⁹ and it was eligible for living, for migrants, and its image as a developed country among the common people was not lost quickly.¹⁰⁰ Croatia as a part of Western Europe in the full meaning is an echo in a similar way, from the old times, as *Antemurale Christianitatis*.

In my opinion, Croatia should build and shape its identity, as everything else, on the features of all three cultural regions. If that was not easy earlier on because the divisions were stricter, it should be easier today in the society we live in, and perhaps even an advantage. The Balkan component should not be ignored, because doing so would ignore a part of our own reality. And when we ignore something, it becomes a problem. However, a problem persists in making divisions among scientists (especially those less conversant, from a faraway world), who like to draw sharp borders (Croatia is a small country) between worlds, and positioning a whole country into a single space. Here, heritage matters of the former state Yugoslavia, which was clearly positioned in the Balkans (by itself, and even ideologically)¹⁰¹ and by the world (or the West), and Croatia is one of its successors.

The inclusion of Croatia into the Balkans is constrained, biased on generalisations or stereotypes because of ignoring the field and even out of bad intentions, driven by the same motives as those of the Enlightenment philosophers, giving labels, creating opinions and world visions (somewhat consciously, somewhat unconsciously) on behalf of western European and American sciences. It is well known that the most powerful, wealthy and developed, and, thus, the most influential sciences (with data, labels, opinions, which are repeated, taken for granted, and accepted without checking) are the American, British, French and German (the German is currently, perhaps, a bit better in that regard, likely due to the geographical proximity).¹⁰² I can give an example from Trinity College Dublin. In the module *Introduction to Central, East European and Russian Studies*, Croatia was situated in the Balkans because the coordinator needed or

⁹⁸ A part of them, see Todorova 2009

⁹⁹ Maddison (MPD) 2023. According to Ashmead-Bartlett (1923: 17) Argentina, together with the USA and England, participated in the nourishment of Austria after 1919.

¹⁰⁰ According to analysis on an Argentinian television, this change happened in 1945. For example, see https://youtu.be/t96wJNE_YsY?si=Kg0yeJCENo14sXR8.

¹⁰¹ On the other hand, only ideologically it could be explained why some Slovenes consider themselves Balkan nowadays, as opposed to the germanisation (or austrianisation) they suffered to a great extent during history.

¹⁰² Todorova claims that the Western sciences and media created a “demon” from the word *Balkan* and its derivations. See especially 2009: 33-37.

wanted to present it within the Balkan countries. But it was not given a fair chance to be presented in its Balkan context in correlation with its Central Europe or Mediterranean contexts. Paradoxically, in another lecture of the same module, Croatia was presented on a map as being part of Central Europe. Or why even today, it is possible to find Yugoslavia as an existent country, in various forms, designated even by Europeans.

These kinds of opinions which took root and are incorrect, unchecked or out of date are more visible regarding Slovenia, still considered Balkan by some authors,¹⁰³ and even in travel guides, e.g., *Western Balkans* by Lonely Planet (2024), including literary travel guides as well. Slovenia never was part of the Balkans culturally, although some geographers included it, as indicated by Todorova (2009: 30). This is a legacy of the former country Yugoslavia, and it will be difficult to get rid of it, because this vision was shaped during the whole 20th century, when contemporary science was being established, and people grew up with it.

Although the Balkans are marked negatively, as an otherness, not only by the (European) West, but also by Croats,¹⁰⁴ sometimes it's better to be Balkan than an unaccepted (and dumped) son of Western Europe,¹⁰⁵ not only because one knows what it is, but because of Western European hypocrisy, arrogance and haughtiness,¹⁰⁶ and even humiliation. On the other hand, there is Croatian hypocrisy: the Croats consider themselves Western European officially but act as Balkan in unofficially hiding it. Finally, I think Croatia and the Croats should build their identity in their own way, and rely less on this or that concept. However, it is not possible to ignore the shared history we have with others.

In summary, let us answer the title question: Croatia's belonging to the West (primarily culturally) is not a myth, but it is also not the full reality. Present day Croatia was predominantly part of the Western European cultural circle, or Western Europe (at least as a periphery, because of the Turkish invasion, if not by other social factors) from the High Middle Ages until 1918. At the same time (from the late 15th to late 17th century), its territories were occupied by Turks and a military zone (*Vojna krajina*) was established, so it also was part of the Balkans. In 1918, it joined the State of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and Yugoslavia, where an acculturation and further balkanisation took place, on behalf of others and the Croats themselves. Therefore, the Croatian culture as a whole (including Bosnia and Herzegovina) belongs to both the Western European and Balkan circles (at varying levels for each and by some elements at the same level for both). The Croatian identity is ambiguous, bplex (if not triplex), with two major divisions crossing such a small territory, that is as it is diverse as its landscapes and dialects.

It could be observed that when considering defining the space that a country historically belongs to, it is better to refer to its culture or circle (rather than to belonging), since notions of cultural regions and geographical notions may overlap but

¹⁰³ "It is thought, especially in Anglo-American works, that Slovenia and Croatia are part of the Balkans as well." *Hrvatska enciklopedija*, s.v. *Balkan* It is, similarly, thought by Todorova 2009: 30, 31.

¹⁰⁴ And not only Croats, but the Bulgarian as well (at least sometimes), for example, see Todorova 2009.

¹⁰⁵ Regarding the unacceptance on behalf of the Western Europeans, and even distortion of facts when concerning about eastern Europe, see Polish writer Miłosz 1999: 5-6.

¹⁰⁶ A good comparison was made by Todorova; if the Balkans are marked as savage and cruel (in killing among themselves), what then are the Germans?

not necessarily coincide. Cultural regions are continuums, because there could be differences in social factors, and since perceptions and “concepts” can change, as shown above. However, given that we live in a world where money is so important, and development and economic power form the core of today’s society, while deeper differences have mostly disappeared, it is not unrealistic to expect in the future that the main divisions will be based on monetary and economic power (although such criteria should be applied worldwide, and not only in Europe). Although J. Mikanowski said goodbye to such a division (*Goodbye Eastern Europe*, 2023), I do not think this is the case, and economic differences still remain (though less). However, in such a division, other countries would also be left outside Western Europe: Portugal, Spain, Ireland (historically). Until the end of the 20th century, Ireland was poorly developed, and regarding its culture is (almost) completely English in the older periods with respect to the Western European component. Spain, beside the economic issue, has other problems regarding the features of today’s Western Europe, such as major corruption, abuses of human rights, problems with rule of law, and the state of law. Spain is not a democracy, unfortunately. And these countries are considered parts of Western Europe because they are undoubtedly in the west, and it is impossible to avoid them in the geographical sense. In my opinion, this kind of division (without these countries) forms *Western Europe* based on economic power, and this coincides with “Western Europe” as traced by Herder in the Enlightenment (Wolff, 1994: 307-308). It is interesting how the image of country changes with economic progress. The Irish accent, words and manner of speech (i.e., Irish people, or characters) are perceived and presented positively (“cool”) in movies and television recently (unlike earlier).¹⁰⁷ This is why it is good to base divisions on culture (or circle), as an important, stable factor (that is omnipresent), and not on development, which can change, as can the perceptions and concepts, as shown by the cases of Argentina and Ireland.

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¹⁰⁷ Freyne 2024

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