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## Mental Maps on the Negotiating Table. Symbolic Geographies in Croatian Accession to the European Union<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Some of the seminal concepts which examined the “patterns of representation” in and of the Balkan region within the “critique of Balkanism” in the 1990s were once again used and interpreted in the following decade within the body of literature that critically approached the era of the two enlargements of the European Union. A number of authors attempted to examine the EU’s application of the conditionality policy in relation to the discourses which perpetuated various “gradations of Europeaness”, but also in relation to the national myths of many East-Central European countries, according to which their own eastern border is envisaged as Europe’s “last outpost”. Even today, when many of the formerly “Eastern European” countries have been EU members for more than a decade, the discursive threads related to the symbolic power relations retain their relevance. This paper will draw upon the examples from research performed in the pre-accession period in Croatia in order to demonstrate how the fuzzy and porous cultural and civilizational borders of Central Europe and the Balkans are envisaged and deployed in national, regional and continental symbolic geographies. It will also engage with the metaphor of “tidemarks” (Green), which attempts to include both space and historical time in the analysis of the border-related practices.

**Keywords:** symbolic geography, European Union, Croatian accession process, Central Europe, the Balkans

1 This study was originally developed and written as a working paper within COST Action ISo803 *Re-making Eastern borders in Europe: A network exploring social, moral and material relocations of Europe’s Eastern Peripheries* (2009-2013). This chapter is a somewhat altered version of that text. See: O. Obad, *The Importance of Being Central European: Traces of Imperial Border(s) in Croatian Accession to the EU*, “EastBordNet Working Papers”, 2010, [http://www.eastbordnet.org/working\\_papers/open/documents/Obad\\_Importance\\_of\\_being\\_Central\\_European\\_101005](http://www.eastbordnet.org/working_papers/open/documents/Obad_Importance_of_being_Central_European_101005) [05.10.2015].

At one point in her book titled *Imagining the Balkans*, Maria Todorova, the author who first named and described Balkanism as a discursive formation of a decisive impact on the perception of the Balkans in the West, states that: “[i]n the ambiguous relation between geography and politics within the concept of geopolitics, the latter seems to have the upper hand.”<sup>2</sup> “Europe,” after all, “ends where politicians want it to end,”<sup>3</sup> is Todorova’s conclusion in a passage which primarily addressed the perils of political abuse of irresponsible scholarship, and which later became a popular quote in various academic accounts of the relationship between symbolic geography and politics. Among others, there is Liotta’s assertion according to which “the mental maps that decision makers use have everything to do with how and where they draw the line.”<sup>4</sup>

The changed political context, as I will attempt to demonstrate in this chapter, may elicit changes in the interpretations of historical and cultural legacies and it may also lead to the introduction of entirely new notions related to national/regional symbolic geographies. Some notions demonstrate resilience even in the face of transformed political and societal circumstances, or they continue to function, albeit with slightly altered, mutated meanings. At other times, they are dormant until a new opportunity, one which will put them back into public circulation, arises. In this paper I will present some of the modes in which several key notions related to national, regional and continental symbolic geographies – such as Central Europe or the Balkans – were deployed in discourses which accompanied the political and bureaucratic process of Croatia’s accession to the European Union. Instead of following the diverse discursive threads which were uncovered throughout my long-term research into perceptions of the European Union, I will focus on the ways in which borders are imagined, employed and maintained within the different levels of symbolic geographies.

Since 2007, I conducted several sets of semi-structured interviews with groups of interviewees who were in various ways related

2 M. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford University Press, New York 2009, p. 139.

3 Ibidem.

4 P.H. Liotta, *Imagining Europe: Symbolic Geography and the Future*, “Mediterranean Quarterly”, vol. 16, 2005, no. 3, p. 69.

to the European Union: from the Croatian negotiators with the EU, via the law students who attended a class on the European Public Law, to agricultural entrepreneurs who applied to the EU pre-accession funds in agriculture, and Croatian EU officials, who were employed in EU institutions since the country became member of the Union in 2013. I deliberately chose groups of interviewees who varied greatly in terms of age, gender, education and social status. The problem with narrowing the research solely to the groups of eloquent and well-informed collocutors such as “intellectuals of statecraft,” is that they “tend to draw on and embellish a loosely coherent set of myths about nature, culture, and geography, even when they do not work in the same end of the political spectrum.”<sup>5</sup> My research confirmed such claims: some of the most intriguing – and, also, most difficult to analyze – “imaginings” came from students and agricultural entrepreneurs, who related to the predominant discourses in indirect and unexpected ways. Nonetheless, since I intend to examine the overlap between the symbolic and the political, and especially in relation to the border-making practices, this chapter will primarily be based upon the examples from the interviews with Croatian negotiators with the EU, since they offer the richest material for such analytical purposes.

In all of the interviews I guaranteed anonymity to the interviewees, for many times throughout the conversation their responses would have most likely been phrased more carefully or diplomatically had they not been promised such confidentiality. At times, I also left out certain parts of the interviews which could have, and especially in the case of negotiators, exposed the interviewees’ identity through circumstantial information, such as their area of expertise or career trajectories.

5 Gusterson and Besteman referred to in: M. Kuus, *Critical Geopolitics*, The International Studies Association Compendium Project, [http://www.isacomps.com/info/samples/criticalgeopolitics\\_sample.pdf](http://www.isacomps.com/info/samples/criticalgeopolitics_sample.pdf) [28.09.2015].

# 1 Lesser, Semi-developed, Liminal ... Europe

Several key studies, which analyzed the discourse within and about the Balkans, were published throughout the 1990s in the context of wars on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, which reinforced these works' academic prominence.<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this text, I will examine several works which have, in the past decade, confirmed their interpretive value in a number of critical analyses of the EU enlargements. First is the aforementioned Todorova's work on Balkanism, in which she traces the origins of stereotypes about the Balkan Peninsula, represented as "a bridge between stages of growth, which invokes labels such as semi-developed, semi-colonial, semi-civilized, and semi-oriental."<sup>7</sup>

Geographically inextricable from Europe, yet culturally constructed as "the other," the Balkans became, over time, the object of a number of externalized political, ideological and cultural frustrations and have served as a repository of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of the "European" and "the West" has been constructed.<sup>8</sup>

Mapping out the representations of the Balkans in various stages, such as the "discovery" of the peninsula by European travellers in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) which incited *news of the barbarities* that upset the neighbouring, Western "civilized world," all the way to the more recent accounts of the wars on the territory of ex-Yugoslavia in the 1990s,<sup>9</sup> Todorova comes to a conclusion that the legacy of the Ottoman rule has been decisive for the Balkan peninsula and that the *Ottoman elements*, or at least those features which were perceived as such, "have mostly invoked the current stereotypes."<sup>10</sup> And unlike Orientalism, "which is a discourse about an imputed opposition," Balkanism is "a discourse about an imput-

6 Cf. O. Obad, *On the Privilege of the Peripheral Point of View: A Beginner's Guide to the Study and Practice of Balkanism*, [in:] T. Petrović (ed.), *Mirroring Europe: Ideas of Europe and Europeanization in Balkan Societies*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2014, p. 20-38.

7 M. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, p. 16.

8 Eadem, *The Balkans: From Discovery to Invention*, "Slavic Review", vol. 53, 1994, no. 2, p. 455.

9 N. Lindstrom, *Between Europe and the Balkans: Mapping Slovenia and Croatia's "Return to Europe" in the 1990s*, "Dialectical Anthropology", vol. 27, 2003, no. 3-4, p. 315.

10 M. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*.

ed ambiguity.”<sup>11</sup> While Orientalism deals with “a difference between (imputed) types, Balkanism treats the differences within one type”<sup>12</sup> so that, from the Balkanist perspective, people in the Balkans are not necessarily regarded as essentially different from Europe, but less, or incompletely European.

In the examining of the symbolic geography of Europe, several authors have depicted a hegemonic discourse in which notions of “Europeaness” and civilization gradually diminish from the West toward the East. Related to them is the concept of “nesting orientalisms,” which was first applied in the context of the breakup of Yugoslavia by Milica Bakić-Hayden and Robert Hayden.<sup>13</sup> The concept refers to a discursive mechanism through which the Western Orientalizing gaze, with its tendency to instil various dehumanizing stereotypes such as “primitivism” or “backwardness” is continuously passed on and reproduced, predominantly in the (south)-eastern direction.

The gradation of “Orients” that I call “nesting orientalisms” is a pattern of reproduction of the original dichotomy upon which Orientalism is premised. In this pattern, Asia is more “East” or “other” than eastern Europe; within eastern Europe itself this gradation is reproduced with the Balkans perceived as most “eastern”; within the Balkans there are similarly constructed hierarchies.<sup>14</sup>

Among other things, these studies present the ways in which Habsburg legacy, along with other “markers” of Westernness, was used as a proof of higher developmental rank among the nationalist elites in Slovenia and Croatia. On the other hand, citizens of those parts of former Yugoslavia who were placed lower on that same scale invented their very “own ‘others,’ whom they perceive as even lower.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, for example, “Eastern Orthodox peoples perceive themselves as more European than those who assumed identities of European

11 Ibidem, p. 17.

12 Ibidem, p. 19.

13 M. Bakić-Hayden, R. Hayden, *Orientalist Variations on the Theme “Balkans”: Symbolic Geography in Recent Yugoslav Cultural Politics*, “Slavic Review”, vol. 51, 1992, no. 1, p. 1-15; M. Bakić-Hayden, *Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia*, “Slavic Review”, vol. 54, 1995, no. 4, p. 917-931.

14 M. Bakić-Hayden, op. cit., p. 918.

15 Ibidem, p. 924.

Muslims and who further distinguish themselves from the ultimate orientals, non-Europeans.”<sup>16</sup>

The aforementioned importance of Habsburg legacy in the national and regional symbolic geography is intertwined with the notion of Central Europe. In his essay on the “tragedy of Central Europe,” originally published in 1983, a Czech writer Milan Kundera describes the predicament of the Central European nations in the following manner: politically, they are subject to Soviet domination, yet culturally they still belong to the West, which had abandoned them in spite of their enormous contribution to “Western” or “European” culture, or, precisely because the West itself no longer cared for culture as the fulfilment of its highest civilizational values. Interestingly, most of the peoples mentioned by Kundera as the ones belonging to Central Europe at the time are today among the “newer” – or, as in the case of Croatia – “newest” members of the European Union.

Some of the authors who have attempted to deconstruct the romanticized imaginings of Central Europe emphasize that it is a sort of region which is “not a place, but an intellectual and political project that functions to pass alterity further east,” and that its distinguishing from Eastern Europe was based on the “moral superiority of the civilized Central Europe over the less civilized Russia.”<sup>17</sup> Attila Melegh, on the other hand, asserts that the notion of Central Europe reappeared in public discussions “in the late 1970s and early 1980s.”<sup>18</sup> The notion played an important – although not uncontested – role in the political call for the “return to Europe” in Eastern European countries, and “is linked to the hierarchization of Eastern Europe, with practical consequences for the more ‘Eastern’ parts of Europe such as Russia and the Balkans.”<sup>19</sup>

In the studies which discuss the usage of Central European identity in the predominant discourse of Croatian social and political elites in the 1990s, it may be noted that the call for the “return to Europe” –

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 922.

<sup>17</sup> M. Kuus, *Europe's Eastern Expansion and the Reinscription of Otherness in East-Central Europe*, “Progress in Human Geography”, vol. 28, 2004, no. 4, p. 480.

<sup>18</sup> A. Melegh, *On the East-West Slope: Globalization, Nationalism, Racism and Discourses on Central and Eastern Europe*, CEU Press, Budapest, New York 2006, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p. 46.

which was, in case of Croatia, interrupted by the war – acquired an even more important meaning of the “escape from the Balkans”<sup>20</sup>. Rihtman-Auguštin, in an article published in the second half of the 1990s, asserts that the Balkans were abhorred not only by the ruling party, but by the representatives of the opposition as well. The author puts it this way: “while the ruling party threatened *the people and the opposition with the Balkan black hole*, the opposition proved that it was *the government itself that behaved in a Balkan manner*, which led into that same black hole.”<sup>21</sup>

As it may be observable from the literature review presented this far, in order to understand multiple levels of symbolic geographies in Croatian context, one needs to take into account entities of various sorts: imaginary as well as geographical regions, the once-existing empires as well as the politically-produced entities, such as the Western Balkans.<sup>22</sup> However, in what ways such heterogeneous entities are called upon to participate in the border-making processes, and, even more, what is the nature of such borders, remains somewhat unclear. This is why I will apply in the following analysis the conceptualization of borders as “tidemarks,” a notion proposed by Sarah Green,<sup>23</sup> which challenges the understanding of border as a line – “a static entity, fixed in place, without time.”<sup>24</sup> Tidemarks should be thought of as a metaphor which “combines space and historical time, and envisages both space and time as being lively and contingent.”<sup>25</sup> They simultaneously represent “what is left after some kind of past activity has occurred, and imply more activity to come,”<sup>26</sup> a feature which, in my opinion, makes them particularly suitable in the analyses related to symbolic geographies.

20 Cf. N. Lindstrom, op. cit., p. 313-329; D. Rihtman-Auguštin, *Zašto i otkad se grozimo Balkana?*, “Erasmus”, vol. 19, 1997, p. 27-36.

21 D. Rihtman-Auguštin, op. cit., p. 35.

22 Cf. T. Petrović, *Dolga pot domov: reprezentacije zahodnega Balkana v političnem in medijskem diskurzu / A Long Way Home: Representations of the Western Balkans in Political and Media Discourses*, Mirovni inštitut, Ljubljana 2009, p. 28-33.

23 S. Green, *Lines, Traces and Tidemarks: Reflections on Forms of Borderli-ness*, “EastBordNet Working Papers”, 2009, [http://www.eastbordnet.org/working\\_papers/open/documents/Green\\_Lines\\_Traces\\_and\\_Tidemarks\\_090414.pdf](http://www.eastbordnet.org/working_papers/open/documents/Green_Lines_Traces_and_Tidemarks_090414.pdf) [04.10.2015].

24 Ibidem, p. 6-7.

25 Ibidem, p. 17.

26 Ibidem, p. 7.

Tidemarks still preserve a certain sense of line inherent in borders, albeit “in the sense of connection and relation, in the sense of movement and trajectory, and in the sense of marking differences that make a difference,”<sup>27</sup> and unlike the ways in which borders are commonly thought about, they are not necessarily located on the territorial edges. In the following analysis, I will attempt to examine the ways in which tidemarks may contribute to the analysis of national, regional and continental symbolic geographies, which were present in the narratives of my interviewees.

## 2. EU as a Mentor

In my research of the perception of the European Union in Croatia, I was inspired by the body of literature which focused on the symbolic power relations in the political processes of EU enlargements in the 2000's. Such a critical perspective, among other things, insisted that the issues of culture and history, pertinent to the symbolic geography of the whole continent, should not be extricated from academic research in this area. And a number of authors, who examined the EU expansion toward the East, were inspired, or, at least, informed by earlier analyses of discourse on Eastern Europe, and, especially, the Balkans.<sup>28</sup>

The relationship of the EU towards the candidate countries in the accession process evoked colonial metaphors, which, in some opinions, pointed to the imperial past of some of the key Western European members of the Union,<sup>29</sup> a legacy largely absent from the “official” politics of representation of the EU. More often, though, a more abstract sort of coloniality was evoked, one which does not nec-

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 17.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. J. Böröcz, *From Empire and Coloniality in the “Eastern Enlargement” of the European Union*, [in:] J. Böröcz, M. Kovács (eds.), *Empire's New Clothes: Unveiling EU Enlargement*, Central Europe Review e-books, 2001, p. 4-50; B. Busch, M. Krzyżanowski, *From Inside/Outside the European Union: Enlargement, Migration Policy and the Search for Europe's Identity*, [in:] W. Armstrong, J. Anderson (eds.), *Geopolitics of European Union Enlargement: The Fortress Empire*, Routledge, London, New York 2007, p. 107-124; M. Kuus, *Europe's Eastern Expansion and the Reinscription of Otherness in East-Central Europe*, p. 480; A. Melegh, op. cit.; J. Zielonka, *Europe as Empire: The Nature of the Enlarged European Union*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. J. Böröcz, op. cit., p. 4-50.



essarily imply “territorial occupation and direct exploitation,” but rather “a complex form of domination, including the hierarchical classification of the populations of the planet, the reformulation of local concepts of space and time, the export of sexual energies into the *East*, the *imperial gaze* and most importantly the colonization of consciousness.”<sup>30</sup>

In a similar vein, Merje Kuus, asserts that “[t]he lack of an explicit Western colonial domination does not preclude the relevance of postcolonial theory to East-Central Europe,”<sup>31</sup> and that a critical examination of the EU enlargement through such a theoretical perspective would “highlight the dichotomy of Europe and the East”<sup>32</sup> which is seminal in this political process. The suggested dichotomy does not function through “clear-cut dichotomies,” but, instead, through the mechanism of gradation, which operates within and outside Europe through similar “inscriptions of otherness” – it is about the parts of the world which are defined as “not yet” or “not fully” European.<sup>33</sup> Such a discursive mechanism, this “gradation of Europeanness”, is present in the discourse in which EU enlargement is embedded. It enables the discussion of certain East-Central European countries in terms of their “proximity to, or likeness of, an idealized Europe.”<sup>34</sup> And instead of being encouraged to “challenge the East/West dichotomy,” the candidate countries are only encouraged to “align themselves with the *right side*.”<sup>35</sup>

Attila Melegh imagines a similar gradation in the form of a slope – an “East/West slope” or a “civilizational slope” – which is based upon the notion of the diminishing levels of civilization in the eastward direction. Such a discourse “prescribes the gradual Westernization of different areas of the world;” it incites “a drive to climb higher” through the process of “upward emancipation.”<sup>36</sup> Melegh traces symptoms of such discourse within the EU enlargement criteria. In the following passage, he comments on the 1993 Copenhagen criteria, the “essen-

30 A. Melegh, op. cit., p. 29.

31 M. Kuus, *Europe's Eastern Expansion and the Reinscription of Otherness in East-Central Europe*, p. 483.

32 Ibidem.

33 Ibidem.

34 Ibidem, p. 484.

35 Ibidem.

36 Ibidem, p. 5.

tial conditions” that the candidate countries need to satisfy in order to become member states.

It can clearly be seen that the EU enlargement process is not imagined as a negotiation between the assigned political body of the EU and certain nation states, with a deadline to be met, but as a timeless *process* (the question being when), of achieving certain capacities like the “stability of institutions guaranteeing” humanitarian liberal ideas such as the “rule of law,” “human rights” etc., or the “existence” of a “functioning market economy” or the “capacity to cope with” certain “pressures within the Union.” Even at first glance it can be seen that the criteria are vague and imply processes with no real end.<sup>37</sup>

In an attempt to empirically research how the “core” EU voice resonates among the newer EU member states, Busch and Krzyżanowski conducted interviews with the members of the so-called European convention, in which the representatives of then-accession and candidate countries, such as Hungary or Romania, participated in “drawing up a constitutional reform plan for the EU and sketching its future” along with the “representatives of the pre-2004 member states and the EU’s central institutions.”<sup>38</sup> Based on the analysis of the interviews, the authors predicted “that the incorporation of new member states will continue the further reproduction of exclusive visions of Europe,”<sup>39</sup> which were previously conveyed by the core members of the EU. In these exclusive visions, the EU is, for example, viewed as an entity which should maintain the highest standards within its territory and, simultaneously, enforce strict control over its outside borders. Even more importantly, the authors assert that such notions of Europe fit well within the nation-building myths of the “newer” member states, according to which “they constitute Europe’s last outpost” while “non-Europe starts the other side of their own eastern borders.”<sup>40</sup>

Since the analysis I will present in this chapter is primarily focused on the discourses which arise in EU’s *antechamber*, before the accession, I will only briefly touch upon the findings of the more recent re-

37 Ibidem, p. 17.

38 B. Busch, M. Krzyżanowski, op. cit., p. 107-124.

39 Ibidem, p. 117.

40 Ibidem, p. 118.

search performed by Kuus<sup>41</sup> with the EU civil servants in Brussels. This study claims that the discursive articulations of East-West divisions – within the EU institutions, therefore on the very elite end of the societal spectrum at least – are increasingly subsiding, or that this division is one among “many axes of differentiation”<sup>42</sup> which arise between Northern and Southern, rich and poor, big and small countries, etc. Or, to be more precise, the distinctions pervade, albeit they should be sought on more subtle, class-related levels. They may be, for example, discernible in the matters related to personal style and taste, in which the former Eastern European are still recognized through the lacks thereof, while “[a] certain casual self-confidence in movement, posture, and approach, with clothing and accessories only in a supporting role – a certain urbanity of continental noblesse de robe – still marks a person who is unlikely to come from central Europe.”<sup>43</sup>

### 3. Mental Maps and the Negotiating Table

In the interviews with the Croatian negotiators with the EU<sup>44</sup> I attempted to follow the thread of research which examines, as Liotta writes, how “divisions and linkages that history, culture, religion, politics, and empire have drawn for Europe are still forces at play today in the mental maps that decision makers bring to their policies.”<sup>45</sup>

The question in my research with Croatian negotiators with the EU which elicited most answers concerning such “divisions and linkages”

41 M. Kuus, *Geopolitics and Expertise: Knowledge and Authority in European Diplomacy*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford 2014.

42 Ibidem, p. 143.

43 Ibidem, p. 159-160.

44 The set of interviews which will be examined in this chapter was conducted at the end of 2007 and the beginning of 2008. In this period, I interviewed six negotiators who belonged to the so-called Negotiating Team for the Accession of the Republic of Croatia to the European Union. At the time this set of interviews was performed, there were 13 negotiators in the team, headed by the so-called chief negotiator. Each of the interviewees included in this research was responsible for negotiations in one or more of the so-called chapters – each of them covering a specific area of policy such as “science and research” or “judiciary and fundamental rights.” I also performed a second set of interviews with negotiators in 2013 and 2014, the analysis of which will not be included in this chapter.

45 P. H. Liotta, op. cit., p. 69.

asked the interviewees to situate Croatia according to its regional affiliation.<sup>46</sup>

In many parts of the interviews, negotiators expressed very pragmatic notions in their perception of the EU. As one of the interviewees succinctly put it, the Union was not to be understood as a “magic wand,” one which would make things right at the very moment of Croatia’s accession. The European Union was, as some of the interviewees said, a community of ordinary people, who are made of “flesh and blood,” and the Union itself does not “function flawlessly” as an organization. Another rather common argument which favoured the EU accession emerged in the interviews: as Croatia cannot remain isolated regardless of the accession, it makes more sense for the country to “participate in the making of these decisions, than to be left out,” and still be expected to act according to the decisions decided upon elsewhere. In such notions, there were no traces of discursive mechanisms which essentialize differences and turn them into values.<sup>47</sup> However, as it turned out, those mechanisms were not inexistent, but rather inactive, and the question regarding Croatia’s regional affiliation clearly revealed that underlying such politically pragmatic perceptions of the EU there was another level of different, hierarchical notions of culture and identity.

A typical example of such change of levels in the notions related to Europe and the EU was an interviewee who first stated that the EU was based upon, among other things, the economic interest of its members to strengthen their position on the global market. The argument in favour of Croatia’s joining the EU is clear: as a small country of five million people, it could use its membership to make its position stronger. In another part of the interview, however, the same negotiator explains that Croatia is positioned on the crossroads of different cultures, and that its future success depends upon the country’s ability to move away from “the Balkan” in its identity, and “apply the way in which the organized states of Central Europe” function.

46 For a more detailed account of the research with the Croatian negotiators with the EU, please see: O. Obad, *Imperij kao uzvraćanje udarca: predodžbe o kulturi i identitetu u hrvatskih pregovarača s Europskom unijom*, “Narodna umjetnost”, vol. 46, 2009, no. 2, p. 111-127.

47 Cf. A. Melegh, op. cit., p. 29.

C: ... In this, we were greatly helped by Austrians and Hungarians, when they enslaved us a couple of hundred of years ago, so that ... it did leave a deep trace, and especially in the perception of culture, and so on.

X: The perception of culture?

C: Among our people, no?

X: Oh. And how do our people perceive culture?

C: Culture, the meaning of culture, regardless of the fact that material poverty, which lasted for a long time, probably did make a lot of impact here. But, our people have the tendency to consume culture, even the one ... traditionally Austro-Hungarian, no? There are a lot of people who want that, no?

X: What do you mean by that concretely?

C: Well, theatre, such fine things, no?

The question of regional affiliation led the interviewees to talk about culture and history, and it is in this realm that this negotiator switches from the pragmatic rhetoric of “mutual interests” to a clear example of a “civilizational slope.” Suddenly, Croats are not all that equal to other EU members, but placed somewhere in-between the more civilized nations of Central Europe and its threatening Balkan surrounding. These statements point to the importance of imperial legacy in the current political context: faced with the discourse of EU enlargement, in which historical ties with the West are highly valued,<sup>48</sup> even the “cultural enslavement” by the civilizationally more advanced nations may be interpreted as a lucky twist of Balkan fate.

Most of negotiators that I interviewed placed Croatia in the region of Central Europe, which seemed to be a regional affiliation perceived as shorthand for “European” in the context of EU accession. When asked the same question regarding the country’s regional affiliation, another negotiator answered that Croatia could be seen as related to three different regions: the Balkans, the Mediterranean, and Central Europe. Still, in the part of the interview in which she explains the symbolic importance of EU accession, she underlines the country’s belonging to Central Europe as a region which is part of “Western culture and civilization.” In the following answer, the same negotiator

48 M. Kuus, *Europe's Eastern Expansion and the Reinscription of Otherness in East-Central Europe*, p. 480.

reveals how the supposedly strictly political process of accession intersects with symbolic geography.

D: We always try to emphasize that we are a part of Central Europe, that we are a part of that Western culture and civilization, that we are significant and important – which we are – and it [Croatia's accession to the EU] will be that icing on the cake, I would say. So that: yes, the answer is definitely yes. We deserve to be in the Union because we are like that already, and we will be, in a few years, even better, and that definitely is ... merit for the people, no? You know ... The formal recognition of Croatia as a country that we already recognize it to be, and on that symbolic-cultural, culturological level that date will definitely be ... it.

While joining the EU is a matter of formal recognition of the country's already-existing achievements, belonging to Central Europe and the Western civilization seems to be linked to the perception of the country's overall importance, which is reminiscent of the "generative doubts" which are, in Kiossev's<sup>49</sup> opinion, characteristic of peripheral European cultures. It is the pervasive sense that "they have appeared too late and that their life is a reservoir of lacks of civilization,"<sup>50</sup> which stimulates the periphery to ceaselessly attempt to catch up with the West, or devise other strategies of coping with this sense of lack.

Another recurrent theme in the interviews was the notion of Croatia as more advanced and adjusted to "Western culture and civilization" than its South-Eastern neighbours, which is reminiscent of the overlap of symbolic geography and politics that Busch and Krzyżanowski<sup>51</sup> point to: the reproduction of "exclusive visions of Europe," which is present in the "core" EU voice, finds its fertile ground in the national myths of newer EU members, according to which "non-Europe starts on the other side of their own eastern borders."<sup>52</sup> References to Croatia's Habsburg legacy were, at times, surrounded by examples of such an overlap in my interviews, as well.

49 A. Kiossev, *Notes on Self-Colonising Cultures*, [http://www.kultura.bg/media/my\\_html/biblioteka/bgvntgrd/e\\_ak.htm](http://www.kultura.bg/media/my_html/biblioteka/bgvntgrd/e_ak.htm) [11.10.2015].

50 Ibidem.

51 B. Busch and M. Krzyżanowski, op. cit., p. 107-124.

52 Ibidem, p. 118.

In the following example, the interviewee asserts that it is the country's Central European background which makes Croatia more advanced than its immediate South-Eastern surrounding, even in the sphere of the economy. And the "future" date of EU accession is related to "going back" in time, and amending the disruption which occurred with the dissolution of the Austria-Hungary.

A: We have no use in making comparisons with Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Bulgaria and Romania, which will, in nine out of ten analytical showings, demonstrate that Croatia is in the first place. That was clear to me even before somebody started such an analysis. But, through its economic structure and history, economic position even in the time of Yugoslavia, Croatia is somewhere close to the countries of Central Europe, so that the membership in the European Union will, in a way, close that chapter which was started with the dissolution of the Austria-Hungary.

In a somewhat more meandering argument, another negotiator points out that Croatia is placed "in that South European surrounding," a designation which bypasses the more symbolically burdened regional affiliations. And although he does mention the country's "common history" with the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and Italy, this negotiator maintains that fulfilling the EU requirements is, nonetheless, more important.

B: So, probably a land-registry which we use since, which was great, since Maria Theresa, qualifies us to have some, I don't know, maybe to have books in a better order than, maybe, Serbia or Bosnia or, I don't know, maybe, Greece. I don't know how much it will contribute. But we definitely are in that South European surrounding, and there are no question marks about it, we are here.

Apart from the workings of the discursive mechanism of "nested orientalism," which, more often than not, deployed Croatia's Habsburg legacy in the essentializing of differences between Central Europe and the Balkans, the aforementioned land-registry may be interpreted as a bearer of the trace of another time. Instead of being passively reminiscent of the past, it actively participates in the contemporary border-making practices. Such an interpretive approach may lead us to, as argued by Green, a closer consideration of "irreducibility of historical time in borders, of the ways in which time is crucial to experi-



ences of border.”<sup>53</sup> Related to the same example is the understanding that “border is something best thought of as an active entity.” It could be argued that the border-making potential of a simple land-registry was dormant, next to non-existent until the political context shifted in a way that valued the adjustability to the EU, and, more generally, Western criteria. “Having books in a better order” than Serbia or Bosnia, or having them in an order which makes Croatia more similar to the current EU members such as Austria or Hungary, may be considered an advantage in the accession process. The rise of an older, Habsburg tidemark which included Croatia, therefore, may also be used as an argument in favour of the reshaping of another, political tidemark which at the time this interview was performed still excluded Croatia from the European Union.

A similar overlap of the symbolic and the political I found in another set of interviews, conducted with Croatian law students<sup>54</sup> in 2009, some four years before the country officially joined the European Union. A number of studies performed in the pre-accession period indicated that Croatian students and young people in general were eurosceptical above average,<sup>55</sup> and my interviewees confirmed those results in that the general political stance they expressed opposed joining the European Union. One of the primary targets of their critique, however, was not the EU itself, but the lack of preparedness of the country they lived in, as well as the political representation of the Union as a political goal *per se*, a matter without real choice.<sup>56</sup>

Since this text primarily focuses on the relation between symbolic geographies and border-making practices, I will only discuss one example from these interviews, in which a female student recounts her visit to Budapest with a group of friends. In front of the Hungarian parliament, the guard informs them that tickets are free “for Europe,” while “for the other ones it’s not free.”

<sup>53</sup> Ibidem, p. 12.

<sup>54</sup> In the first half of 2009 I conducted individual and group interviews with 15 students who were attending a course on the European Public Law at the Faculty of Law in Zagreb.

<sup>55</sup> See: O. Obad, *Balkan Lights: o promjenama u predodžbama o Zapadu i Balkanu u Hrvatskoj*, [in:] I. Prica, T. Škokić (eds.), *Horror-porno-ennui*, Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku, Zagreb 2011, p. 9-10.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. ibidem.



I: So, he only said: “for Europe.” Now, we are looking at whether to ask him is it the European Union, or what? All in all: Europe, Europe ... And in front of us: Italians, Germans, French, all different languages. OK. He bumped in, I don’t know, a friend of mine, as if he will go, so that the five of us don’t have to. And he returns: Fuck ... Europe, and this, and that. Now each one of us has to pay 15 euro. And what? We are not European Community, we are not European Union, we are the Balkans. Then we teased them: “Come on, we have the longest border with you,<sup>57</sup> we are neighbours. So what? We signed the Stabilization Agreement,” this and that. Nothing. It does not work. We entered inside, and everything there was made of wood, was made of Slavonian oak. Then we teased each other: Do I have to come to Budapest, and pay 15 euro to watch Slavonian oak?

Here, another nexus of space and historical time emerges. An older, imperial tidemark, whose material trace is oak from the region of Slavonia, once used as building material, serves to emphasize Croatia’s belonging to Europe. A newer tidemark is being materialized as an obstacle at the entrance to the Parliament building, which both physically and financially separates the EU from non-EU citizens. In this example, the older tidemark is used as a decentring and destabilizing tool, when juxtaposed to a more recent border, which is, in this account, presented as less substantial, even provisional and arbitrary. Similarly to the aforementioned land-registry, Croatian oak in the Hungarian parliament figures as a proof that Croatia’s place is within the EU, while the exclusion of Croatian citizens from the regime applied to EU citizens becomes the object of mockery.

## Conclusion: Where Does Europe End?

In this text, I attempted to examine how symbolic geographies, developed in a particular national context, interacted and overlapped with the political and bureaucratic process of EU enlargement.

Most of the interviews I made with Croatian negotiators with the EU shared a common feature: underneath the pragmatic and rational rhetoric, which stressed the importance of arguments in favour

57 Croatia’s longest border is actually with Bosnia and Herzegovina.

of Croatia's joining the EU, there was another discursive level which contained rather hierarchical notions of culture and identity, not necessarily congruent with the "politically correct" official rhetoric of unity and regional cooperation.

Some of the key notions of national as well as regional symbolic geography – such as the Balkans or Central Europe – retained their meanings, which were established in the 1980s and 1990s,<sup>58</sup> in the face of the changed political context in which Croatia entered the process of accession to the European Union. As this research demonstrates, the negotiators mainly interpreted Central Europe as a metonymy of "Western culture and civilization," while the country's Balkan identity was predominantly portrayed in the interviews as a burden and an unwanted part of national identity. Although the discursive mechanism of "gradation of Europeanness"<sup>59</sup> was used in order to differentiate Croatia from its South-Eastern neighbours, the interviewees placed more importance on demonstrating that Croatia's Central European legacy makes the country more similar to EU members, and especially the neighbouring or geographically close ones, such as Hungary or Austria.

From the "return to Europe" in the 1980s, via the "escape from the Balkans" in the 1990s, Central Europe in Croatia in the 2000s came to mean the nearest, neighbouring EU, and that may be the primary reason why the imperial Habsburg legacy regained its importance in what Todorova claims is "ambiguous relation between geography and politics."<sup>60</sup> On the one side, there was a tacit call for authentication of the country's Westernness;<sup>61</sup> on another, an imperial legacy which could be presented precisely as such an authentication.

I also attempted to demonstrate that Green's metaphor of tide-marks<sup>62</sup> is useful in the examining of the overlap of symbolic geography and politics because of the importance it places on the nexus between space and historical time. Tidemarks may bear traces of past

58 Cf. N. Lindstrom, *op. cit.*; D. Rihtman-Auguštin, *op. cit.*, p. 27-36.

59 M. Kuus, *Europe's Eastern Expansion and the Reinscription of Otherness in East-Central Europe*.

60 M. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, p. 139.

61 Cf. M. Kuus, *Europe's Eastern Expansion and the Reinscription of Otherness in East-Central Europe*, p. 480.

62 S. Green, *op. cit.*

activity, and they may also announce “more activity to come.”<sup>63</sup> In some of the examples I outlined, tidemarks which denote Croatia’s imperial legacy were used as a means of destabilizing and decentring the political border which separated Croatia from the EU. Through the reinforcing of the Western European aspect of Croatia’s national identity, those tidemarks were used in order to demonstrate that the EU border is arbitrary, not much more than a provisional line which only proves that “*Europe ends where politicians want it to end.*”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibidem, p. 7.

<sup>64</sup> M. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, p. 139.

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