The Balkans: Mapping Identities (18th – 21st c.)
First International Conference of Nexus Project
Sofia, 18 – 20 October, 2002

The event was the first international conference of Nexus – the central project of the South East European Identity research group, part of the Blue Bird “Agenda for Civil Society in South East Europe” project. It presented the first results of Nexus research project to the wider academic community and was an opportunity for its researchers to discuss their work with prominent international scholars.

The overarching theme of the conference was provided by the main research questions of the South East European Identity group: Is there a common Balkan regional identity? In what terms to theorize about it? The main hypothesis tested was that a new and more productive approach to theorizing about the Balkans will be provided by focusing on the “horizontal dimension” of the Balkan regional identity – studying the similarities between the national and minority groups in the region, instead of reproducing the old paradigm of explanation in terms of discrete national cultural values. The construction of such a common Balkan identity, it was agreed by most of the participants, has to find a way of deconstructing the externally projected negatively prejudiced discourse on the Balkans, without succumbing back to the internally produced ideologically-laden discourse of national identity and values. In this respect, the role of historically and socially constructed “topoi” in the development of local forms of self-identifications was the main topic discussed. The conference in Sofia was a successful first step towards fulfilling the above-mentioned objective, in identifying and clearly defining the problems attending the creation of a positive vision of common Balkan identity.

A rich collection of papers was presented, attempting answers to the main theoretical questions, by aptly employing a multiplicity of theoretical approaches. A justice to this rich body of presentations cannot, unfortunately, be done here. I will only attempt to single out the most representative of their kind papers.

In the focus of many of the highly theoretical papers were different aspects of Maria Todorova’s work *Imagining the Balkans*, and the concept “Balkanism” introduced there. A critical analysis of Todorova’s book was offered by John Neubauer. An original idea came from Calin Andrei Mihailescu, who advanced Globalkanism as a concept, illuminating the globalized aspects of Balkan identity. Klaus Dammann attempted employing Maria Todorova’s concepts in a Luhmannian analysis of the historiography of collective killings in the Balkans.

A brilliant case study of the emergence and disappearance of the so called “morlaccs” was presented by Larry Wolff, the distinguished author of *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of*
Civilization in the Mind of the Enlightenment. The story of the “morlacces,” their “invention” and (at times ambiguous) stigmatization as “barbarians” by the civilized Enlightenment was presented by Prof. Wolff as a precursor of both the described by Todorova Balkanism and the imagined by the West during the cold war era Orientalism of the Balkans. The paper, with both its meticulous attention to the historical details and its theoretically interesting conclusions, triggered a lively discussion.

Many of the papers discussed different aspects of the “imaginary geography” of the region. The presentations of Drago Roksandic and Marco Dogo elaborated in detail on the way real political entities and outdated imaginary perceptions simultaneously “inhabited” the maps of the geographical space of the region in the period 16th - early 19th c. The symbolic presence of mountains in the Balkan national myths as places of genuine national authenticity was studied in the paper of Ulf Brunbauer, with a special emphasis on the Bulgarian national myths. A wide body of papers concentrated on the way the Bulgarian national identity was constructed. Albena Hranova analyzed the way the Bulgarian nationalistic historiography constructed the national space and boundaries. Dessislava Lilova’s paper on the Bulgarian names of the Balkan peninsula presented the Bulgarian national identity in 19th c. as a then yet unfinished project. Alexander Kiossev’s paper on 19th century Multicultural Plovdiv, provided a powerful challenge to this interpretation by stressing the way the Bulgarian community imagined itself as closed, unified and homogeneous, with ever more clearly defined boundaries already during this period.

The contemporary Western Balkans were in the focus of a few very interesting presentations. A sociological research on the Zagreb Youths’ stereotypes about the Balkans, presented by Laura Sakaja and a case study by John Ashbrook about the way the “eastern” Croats from Bosnia and Hercegovina are perceived as war criminals and “barbarians” by the “western” Croats from Istria, provoked a discussion, in which examples of the same phenomena from around the region were further invoked.

The legacy of the Ottoman Empire and its formative influence both for what the Balkans are and how they are perceived was also extensively discussed. The nation-building strategies employed by the Ottoman Empire in the Edrine region, as well as those used in the Ottoman army during the Balkan wars were the subject matter of the papers of Yonka Koksal and Eyal Ginio. The paper of Stefanos Katsikas, on the other hand, explored how the newly emerging nationalisms in the region dealt with their Ottoman legacy by subjecting national minorities to “integrationist” policies.

Antropological analyses of the identity of ethnic minority groups (Bulgarian Karakachans and minorities in the Macedonia region in contemporary Greece) were presented by Alexei Kalionski and Joannis Manos respectively.
An interesting approach to the problems of identity rarely presented at “humanities” conferences was offered by Roumen Avramov and Roumiana Preshlenova, who discussed the economic aspects of constructing a common regional identity in a historical perspective.

In conclusion, let me point out that (as the above description of some of the issues discussed suggests), the *Mapping Identities* conference in Sofia was an ambitious, stimulating and rich academic event, where a multiplicity of topics, theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches were employed to address the problem of how to theorize about Balkan Identity.