

# Contribution to the St. Gallen Wings of Excellence Award 2006

## Europe, the Difficult Dream

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# 36

Europe, the difficult dream

[Tiranë, Albania, 2004]





[Sarajevo, 2004]

Srebrenica,  
Bosnia and  
Herzegovina  
July 11, 2004

I was standing under a blistering Bosnian sun in the middle of a vast field outside Srebrenica as hundreds of men and boys were buried around me. I was lost in this town of ghosts.

In front of me, endless wooden coffins were passed along one unending line. Arms holding coffins left me breathless. Thousands of arms. Young men dug up the earth and made large piles next to each widening hole that seemed bottomless. The women—there must have been hundreds of them—wore white and wore black and sat around the tombstones clutching black-and-white photographs of the dead boys and cried and hit themselves and tore their skin.

Children ran past me unsure of what was happening. Elderly women fainted, and foreign journalists stood on the makeshift wall encircling this cemetery of grass and human mud and framed the scene. I was trapped in the chaos of piercing eyes — eyes that I looked at with shame that I could not understand or explain.

My home, Albania, was not too far from here and yet I was a stranger. Back in 1995, I was 13 and the name Srebrenica seemed like a distant land. But it has been haunting me ever since.

This was Europe's failure.

In this site of mourning, I came face to face with the difficulties of reconciliation in the Balkans. My internship at the War Crimes Chamber in Sarajevo and the hundreds of books and documentaries that I had come across had not prepared me for this day.

It has here that I found both the greatest defeats and the most difficult kind of inspiration for Europe.



[Berlin, 2003]

## Looking for Europe

Princeton  
New Jersey, USA  
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Numerous journalists identify the troubles with the European Union in the lack of legitimacy of increasingly detached elites, or in the fatal loss of European idealism, which, they say, is the product of poor economic performance and soaring unemployment. According to others, the 'European Dream,' as EU specialist

Andrew Moravcsik called the ‘coupling of the national social welfare state with multilateral cooperation in Brussels to promote free markets and common regulations,’ will not be endangered by temporary disagreements.<sup>1</sup> Moravcsik argues that the EU project is stable and will ultimately survive; there only needs to be less nation-state rhetoric and a more pragmatic approach to the underlying economic issues that drive populist reaction. After all, the EU, as analysts incessantly repeat—in what seems to be an attempt to actually convince themselves—is *not* and will *not* be a nation state.

But to dismiss the serious issues of the instability of loyalties to the European idea and the questionable cohesion of a mental plan for Europe is to neglect the deepening cleavages on the continent – potential sources of future contention and discontent. Can the challenges of a global world—and terrorism is only one of them, albeit one that profoundly affects economies and policies across the world—be faced with a project that Western Europeans seem to doubt themselves profoundly?

The assumption of this analysis is that extremism cannot be fought with insecurity. Upon the ruins of the Balkan wars, Europe needs to build the vision of a cultural plurality that it needs to thrive as a global player.

### What is wrong with Europe?

After a year like 2005, defined by the repeated embarrassment of a rejected constitution and the urban chaos of riots in Paris, it is not difficult to come up with a critique of the EU. In between those proclaiming the illness of the grand European idea of wider and deeper integration and others claiming “business as usual in Brussels,” stand the Balkans. Caught in between Western elites (and their ever-dissatisfied constituencies) and the perpetual uncertainty of democratization policies, the more than seventy million people in Southeastern Europe may actually constitute a firm reason to find assurances in the European project. If Western European leaders cease to see the Balkans as an endless source of conflict and crime, it might actually become apparent that the fight against the structures of totalitarianism is not finished without the Balkans. And Western Europe needs the Balkan dreams and aspirations.

The landmark year 1989 constituted the end of a system based on two geopolitical centers caught in a power game that played out across the world. People across cultures and time zones—from Bucharest and Belgrade to Baku and Beijing—lived the consequences of that system. You could see it most poignantly in Berlin’s walled body. The fall of communism prompted emerging Eastern European leaders to think about situating themselves within the Western European sphere. This was both an intellectual project as well as a pragmatic move. It was about the symbolic recovery of a European identity and the embrace of a new

political and economic idea that would liberate ordinary people from the ruins of communism.

While intellectuals in Prague publicly announced their Europeaness and castigated the Soviet Marxist legacy for the region's bankruptcy, the Balkans' emergence from communism was much more painful. Yet dreams of bountiful Western worlds also filled squares in such cities as Tirana. '*E duam Shqipërinë,*' euphoric crowds chanted, '*si gjithë Evropa!*' (We want Albania to become like the rest of Europe!)

EU's enlargement was a historical moment for the most developed of the region's countries. Romania and Bulgaria are set to join the Union. And despite the continental divisions caused by post-9/11 American foreign policy, politicians across the Balkans still talk about 'trans-Atlantic alliances.' 'Integration,' the post-communist leader's favorite catchword, for many uninformed inhabitants in the poorest countries still evokes images of wealthy countries opening up their borders and sharing the wealth. It is exactly these kinds of fantasies—the imagined immigrant floods towards the wealthy West—that shape the populist anti-EU campaigns in Western European capitals.

There is a profound conceptual clash regarding Europe's location in the world today, which is far more troubling than the technical disagreements over constitutional arrangements or the details of agricultural subsidies. First, there is the problem that important issues like the war on terrorism tend to replicate within the continent the rifts between Western Europe and the United States. But perhaps even more serious is the point that the enlargement issue—and, through it, the deeper conceptual implications about what integration actually means for both those seeking membership and the existing members—still remains widely misunderstood.

Of course, there is no consensus about the nature of the EU. But enlargement in the Balkans carries with it both the promise of a definite break with the violent totalitarian past as well as, often, the fantasies of immediately open borders and obvious wealth. It is important not to discard the first idea because the second prompts the fearful images of a flood of immigrants and the incorporation of a largely Muslim population into the Union.

The idea that totalitarianism died in 1989 is misguided, just as the idea that nationalism withered away was proven wrong. While a vast political system stretching from the Mediterranean to Siberia and beyond disintegrated, the structures of a dichotomy—the civilized "we" versus the uncivilized "them"—continue to organize European political thinking. The elite rhetoric of embracing the Balkans into the European project often conceals deep prejudices and insecurities about the region's peoples. 'It's not in Europe's interest to have a black hole a source of conflict and drugs,' responded Lord Ashdown, the EU's envoy in Bosnia, to a question about the Balkans' future.<sup>ii</sup> But the reason for including the Balkans in the European project should not be the concern that they would otherwise

export crime. Embracing the Balkans out of fear—seeing the presence of Muslims and foreigners as an essential part of European reality because they might otherwise breed hatred—reveals a colonialist attitude that inevitably makes local inhabitants profoundly suspicious of the EU's seemingly positive approach. It makes the EU project look simultaneously authoritarian and an exercise in pragmatic politics that chooses to perpetuate—by ignoring or actively imitating—historically-rooted ethnic stereotypes.

Just like communism could incorporate local structures of kinship and patriarchal families into an overarching rhetoric of unprecedented social change, the contemporary rhetoric of shared European values and diversity, produced under capitalism, can actually hide deep-rooted structures of domination within it. The fear of terrorism was a tragic and unfortunate wake-up call for those US policy-makers who thought that markets could take care of the ethno-religious differences between global actors. Western European countries have had years to face something that they hoped would somehow simply go away: Muslims and immigrants, who sometimes form the same group. Even though Muslims constitute daily European reality, they only become visible when fear and terror—the riots, the murder of Theo Van Gogh, the headscarf and the bombings—prompt public debates of 'what is wrong with multiculturalism.'

Unfortunately, the debate on Turkey's EU bid was a lost possibility to reach out to European Muslims. The discussion was framed around the symbolic Muslim conquest of European space and the implied dangers for Western countries. I remember being told by nervous British diplomats in 2002 in Berlin that the EU was a fundamentally Christian project. Turkey was beyond its borders, they said. In such discussions it was always about 'them'—the Muslims—affecting Western European economies, cities, demographic landscapes. But the flames of the Paris riots and the rising political extremisms in the West *also* play out in Eastern European capitals. It is called globalism.

Over six million European Muslims live in the Balkans. Many of them—the Bosnians and the Kosovars—have been victims of genocide and ethnic cleansing in the very heart of Europe, who swore in 1945 'never again.' Yet rarely do Western audiences worry about how exclusionist politics in their capitals complicate issues in ethnically mixed cities in the Balkans. There is still a belief that what happened in Yugoslavia was the product of 'ancient hatreds' and not partly Europe's own failure and partly the product of unstable loyalties and conflicting national projects.



[Tiranë, 2000]

In the words of the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, the Balkans—the wild, barbaric, and ultimately dangerous people that inhabit Western imaginations—actually end up engaging Western Europe in those very terms. He called this paying ‘in flesh the price for being the stuff the Other’s dreams are made of.’ According to Žižek, one of the biggest challenges is to come up with a solution to the problems created by a dichotomy between the civilized self and the barbaric other. But how to do this when the very idea of integration cannot sustain indefinite enlargement into the EU family? Does enlargement and integration necessarily imply a language of inclusion and exclusion? The first step is to recognize and overcome what Žižek called “an ideology which perceives the presence of ‘aliens’ as a threat to national identity, as the principal cause of antagonisms that divide the political body.”<sup>iii</sup>

Tiranë,  
Albania  
[New Year's  
holidays]

The language of the future of the European project ought to reflect an awareness that enlargement into the Balkans will profoundly change

Western Europe, too. If fear dominates a direct engagement that keeps the possibilities of change on all sides open, the European project will prove very difficult because the Balkans—whether in or out—are going to remain perpetual ‘others.’ Nothing less than a profound consideration of the terms in which we think of European political space is necessary. If this sounds vastly exaggerated and utopian, it might be because the seemingly ‘rational’ politics of today are actually rooted in yesterday’s utopias and are informed by a complex history of conquered peoples. Within Europe’s rhetoric of multiculturalism lurks the threat of extremism because the only social actor that is ever questioned is the other—the Muslim, the Surinamese, the asylum seeker, the anonymous criminal from the Balkans—not the self.

The fight against totalitarianism is not a cliché or a relic of history. It is going on across the Balkans and beyond.

Srebrenica will be my generation’s devastating memory of genocide in Europe. Some day, when I will be teaching European history, I will have to explain Auschwitz and Treblinka and the Soviet Gulag. And the rebuilt of Europe. And I will have to explain Srebrenica and Sarajevo’s agony. Tomorrow’s Europe needs to be built upon this difficult legacy.

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All original photographs, taken by this author.

i Andrew Moravcsik, “Europe Will Get It Right,” *Newsweek* (International Edition) December 26, 2005.

ii “Leaders of the former Yugoslavia plead with Brussels,” *Financial Times*, June 3, 2005.

[electronic format: <http://www.euractiv.com/Article?tcaturi=tcm:29-140378-16&type=News>]

iii All quotes from Slavoj Žižek are from “Caught in Another’s Dream,” Rabia Ali and Lawrence Lifschultz (eds.), *Why Bosnia: Writings on the Balkan War* (Stony Creek, Conn: Pamphleteer’s Press, 1993).