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CROATIA  
BETWEEN  
THE BALKANS  
AND EUROPE



Themes and issues related to national, ethnic, and regional identity occupy a prominent place in contemporary geography, particularly political geography. This has been borne out at numerous conferences on these topics as well as in publications that were published during the nineties, in which various authors discuss the mentioned categories (Hooson, 1994). These concepts are of particular importance for the new European states, that is, those historical entities and identities that Hooson calls *long repressed*, and to which he has dedicated an entire chapter in his anthology (Hooson, 1994). During the period of geopolitical transition that began with the end of the Cold War, those countries - including Croatia as a paradigmatic example - has changed their geopolitical code and harmonized it with national interests and existing regional, continental, and global structures and relations.

Geographic position is a dynamic social-geographic category and an important component of national identity, in contrast to location, which is a static category, determined by natural-geographic elements. However, before defining the geographic position of a particular country, it is possible to reach different results depending on the perspective from which one approaches the structure of a certain space. The following can be considered as an illustration. Many were surprised when a Georgian geographer claimed that Georgia, one of the three post Soviet states in the Transcaucasian area, is a European state and that "it has always leaned toward the West", (Gachechiladze, 1995). The Georgian geographer has, of course, given valid argumentation for such an assertion, but the viability of this assertion does not depend on his argumentation; but depends on the answer to this question: Where are in fact the boundary lines of Europe? The context and the perspective from which Georgia is talked about condition the answer.

Some doubts have also been raised concerning the position of Croatia in post-cold-war Europe. There is an ob-

vious discrepancy between national aspirations and the attained degree of integration into the emerging European structure, which is for the majority the fundamental measure of current regional affiliation in Europe at the turn of the century. Simply, such doubts can be reduced to a simple but essentially crucial question: the Balkans or Europe? Moreover, it should be emphasized that the notion of the Balkans carries extremely negative features with connotations of disorder, primitivism and backwardness. To belong to the Balkans, means to be banished from “club of the chosen”. On the other hand, Europe has become a hallmark of order, civilized behavior, culture, development, and progress, or in other words, a prerequisite for “full membership in the club”.

## TRADITIONAL GEOGRAPHIC UNDERSTANDING OF POSITION

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In one of the first articles published after Croatian independence, I defined Croatia as a country in contact with “various cultural, political, and economic... circles which, throughout history, have interacted and clashed within the territory of Croatia” (Klemenčić, 1993).

Retrospectively, it is a question of three cultural circles that have had a decisive influence on the territorial, national, spiritual and material formation of Croatian space and people. The west and south of Croatia were exposed to influences of the European Mediterranean. Although, as a whole, the Mediterranean is a markedly heterogeneous space, only its northwestern, European component is important for Croatia. First of all, this meant contacts with Catholicism in the cultural sense, that is with the Roman, particularly Italian sphere in the ethnic and political sense. In the north, Croatian space was influenced by the Central European circle, that is predominantly Catholic, although its Protestant and Jewish aspects must not be overlooked, as these are also components of that circle. In an ethnic and political sense, Central Europe meant contacts with Germanic peoples (Germans and Austrians) and with Hungarians as well, mostly resulting in influences of a political kind. The third circle is the Balkan or Southeastern European one that is characterized by the domination of Orthodoxy, as well as Islam brought to Europe by the Ottomans in the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In terms of ethnic contact, the main representatives of that circle are the Serbs from the Croatian perspective.

Since the first two influential circles are commonly considered as belonging to parts of the European West, and the third to the European East, Croatia is defined as a

country that is on the boundary of two European cultural poles. However, since the Croatian medieval state came into being under the patronage of the West and it has continued to be under the decisive influence of that circle until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I concluded that there is no reason to question Croatia's place in the West regardless of its border position. The influences of the Mediterranean and the Central European circles were long-lasting and stable and for most of its history, Croatia was in political union with countries from those circles. Its northern, continental areas have been, throughout history a part of the political communities centered in Central European space, whereas Venice, one of the Italian State components influenced the southern, littoral regions, for a long time. Similar conclusions have been made about the position of Croatia by other authors, not only local (Topalović, 1996), but foreign (Ruppert, 1994) as well.

The transitional, that is, contiguous characteristics of Croatia's position, but also its fundamental affiliation to the western circle, is attested to in the world's leading encyclopedias. An excellent illustration, in this sense, is offered by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (in its edition published in the 1990s). However, a glimpse at that handbook reveals something else: a specific dilemma, which the position of Croatia sets off when an attempt is made to position the country within any of the larger European regions.

In its third volume, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is quite unambiguous in response to questions about Croatia's position. The entry for Croatia states that it is "... a country in west-central Balkans". Likewise, in volume fourteen, Croatia can also be found under the entry of Balkan states. As a common feature, in all Balkan societies, including Croatia the entry states "Subjection to Eastern imperial forces isolated most Balkan societies from Western developments for almost two millennia". However, the sub-entry on Croatia within the same macropedic unit, specifies the following about Croatian regions, "although these regions were ruled for centuries by various foreign powers, they remained firmly Western-oriented in culture acquiring a legacy of Roman law, Latin alphabet, and western European political and economic traditions and institutions".

Thus, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* recognizes Croatia as a land of western heritage and culture, yet, at the same time, it is considered as part of the "Balkan states". Moreover, it is claimed that one of the states' main features is that for two millennia they have not participated in the

life and creativity of the West. We are obviously dealing with contradictory points of view, but this contradiction plainly demonstrates that position is a changeable category, that is, the transitional features of Croatia's position.

The author of one of the most comprehensive works on Croatia after its independence also emphasized the border position of Croatia (Tanner, 1997): "Croatia is border land. It lies on the geographical border between Central Europe and the Balkans, and between the Mediterranean world and continental Europe. It lies also on a cultural and religious border between eastern, Byzantine Christendom and Latin West. The very shape of the country reinforces the impression of a frontier. Nothing compact, square or secure. Instead the country curves around Bosnia in a narrow arc, in the shape of a crescent moon, or a boomerang." This is not all. Tanner is fully aware of all the consequences that such a border position has left upon the people who inhabit such a land and therefore points out that: "Because they inhabit the rim, or the ramparts, never the middle, the people of border land are not relaxed about their heritage or culture. There is always the lurking danger that the rest of Europe may forget about them or – worse – confuse them with the people to the east and south."

It seems that from these perceptions that have been quoted, Tanner understands correctly Croatian dissatisfaction with the way major western countries, the European Union in particular, have classified Croatia. From a Croatian perspective, the Southeast European or Balkan component is often downplayed, while the Mediterranean and, especially, the Central European is highlighted. In this way, it is believed that this will ensure and establish the desired affiliation to Europe. Any dispute of these characteristics in Croatia is met with disapproval or total rejection. Tanner brings this to our attention very well: "Pick up any recent publication by the Croatian authorities, even a tourist brochure, and count the number of times such words as *Western*, *Catholic*, *Central Europe* or even *civilization* appear. Or try dropping the word *Balkan* into a conversation with a Croat and wait for the inevitable protest: Croatia is not part of the Balkans, but part of the *West*."

## THE INTERNATIONAL POSITION OF CROATIA

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In the period after the Second World War, Europe was divided into the East and West. By the end of the eighties, that division had definitely become history. Thereafter, a new geopolitical division of Europe began to take shape. Al-

though at first glance the picture appears complex, Europe in fact has once again two fundamental components, that is, two basic groups of countries. European Union members constitute one group. This group is in fact identical to the European West from the cold-war period. The other group is made up of the so-called transition countries. Thus, at the beginning of the new millennium Europe consists of the European Union and transition Europe.

Since the model developed by the West European countries during the cold-war period has become a generally acceptable European model for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, all the transitional countries have expressed both an intention and desire to become, in the future, part of a united Europe. This model has no alternative, so it is justifiable to conclude that the European Union has not only imposed itself as the European hegemon but that other countries have accepted this role.

However, not all the countries in transition share the same relation with the European Union. They have often been compared to the Solar system in which the European Union takes the sun's central position. Transitional countries rotate around the European Union at various distances, just like planets of the Solar system around the star in the center. The distance from the center of the system is proportional to the stage achieved by each country in its approach to the European Union, that is, the position of each country in the process of European integration.

According to the position of transitional countries in "orbit", the European Union developed a so-called regional approach in which transitional countries are divided into several groups. Although these regions, i.e., groups of countries with similar characteristics have been given geographic names, the division is based on a combination of geographic position and the evaluation of the European Union concerning the quality of the political and economic system of particular countries. There are different views, as well as various divisions of transitional countries into groups, largely depending on the context. However, it seems legitimate to refer to four groups of transitional countries: (1) the East European group including Russia, Belorussia (politically tied) and the Ukraine (functionally tied); (2) the three post-Soviet Baltic states; (3) successor states to the former Yugoslavia along with Albania, Bulgaria, and Romania make up the Balkan lands, or, more politely Southeastern Europe. This third group is further subdivided into the "Eastern Balkans" consisting of Bulgaria and Romania, and the "Western Balkans" including the former Yugoslav states and Albania; (4) finally,

the fourth group consists of countries that are geographically closest to the European Union – Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia, as well as Slovenia that was later included, even though it was previously considered to be a Balkan country. This group is usually called “Central Europe”, and the states within it are in principle first in line to join the European Union.

In the case of Croatia, there is a discrepancy between expectation and conceptions of the official government policy, as well as the majority of the population on the one hand, and the real situation, i.e., the above-mentioned regional division by the European Union on the other. From a Croatian perspective, the actual position of the country is not consistent with its heritage and potential. Croatia should not be in the Balkan group; its place is in the Central European group of transitional countries. This “misunderstanding” has been a source of deep frustration, and even an outburst of “Anti-Europeanism” in Croatia.

The obvious gap that exists between the conceptual maps of Europe from a Croatian perspective compared to the European Union's perspective is due to the fact that the contemporary concept of regional affiliation has not been determined by geographic, historic, and cultural factors, as emphasized by Croats, but primarily by political, economic, and geopolitical factors and reasons. Since West European integration depends on a set of general principles, that constitute the foundation stones of the common institutions, it is only logical that the European Union expects and requires prospective members among the transitional countries to respect these same principles and to accept the “rules of the game”, or parameters. The existing regionalization, with which Croatia is dissatisfied, has been carried out from the “wide-angle” perspective of the European Union. It depends, first of all, on evaluation of the potential quality of the national political elite. Countries have been grouped primarily according to an assessment that has been obtained through the behavior of the ruling political elite, and this includes readiness to accept and apply the proclaimed and prevalent European principles.

Leaving aside an analysis of reasons, it is valid to conclude that Croatia did not join the Central European group of transitional countries on time. Instead, Croatian foreign policy was largely oriented toward Bosnia and Herzegovina. Moreover, as one of the signatories of the Dayton Peace Agreement, Croatia accepted its share of responsibility for the Accord's implementation, and thus, in the eyes of the international community, became a part of the so-called “Daytonland”. Hence, the countries from this



group are not part of Central Europe, but, rather, belong to the Balkans.

Croatian political attempts to influence a different regional classification of the country have been very much like the desperate attempts of a person drowning in quicksand attempting to survive: instead of support at the surface, rescue attempts have pulled the drowning person down further into the mud. This applies to Croatian politics; attempts to show that the country does not belong to the Balkans reinforced the international community's perception of Croatia as a Balkan state.

## INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

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The existing political regionalization of Europe created from the "wide-angle" perspective of the European Union largely depends on the current quality of the ruling national elite. Transitional countries have been classified, first of all, according to the assessment of national elite behavior. In this context, it is valid to consider the current position of Croatia. Since political practice can change quickly, a particular country can change its political image overnight. Thus, one may expect that just as quickly the European Union can reposition such a country, that is, revise its position on the map of transitional Europe that, in turn, has an impact on the treatment of these countries.

The priority given to political criteria is the main reason why other criteria have been pushed aside. In a discussion about the geopolitical division of Europe today, the question of context has remained paramount. If the political context is taken into account, no space can be given to other factors. Moreover, the final picture - regional grouping - is quite different from one that could emerge within a different context. Political geography uses a complex definition of position - one that rests on several principles.

From a Croatian perspective, a pronounced tendency to belittle the importance of the complex, transitional position of Croatia, by emphasizing and singling out exclusively the Central European characteristics can be noted.

The uncertainty that needs to be resolved in the future is how to suppress and overcome the negative heritage springing forth from the transitional position of the country. Instead, it is crucial to develop amenities and highlight the advantages that stem from Croatia's position at the meeting point of several European macro-entities.

The issue of perspective also remains important. It is not the same if one looks from Vukovar, Dubrovnik, or Zagreb, or from Brussels, Strasbourg, Paris, or London. In

addition, if one assumes a bird's eye view of the European Union, many details and nuances that are so important from the insiders' perspective are likely to be missed.

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