

## IDENTITY AS A BORDER IN WESTERN BALKANS. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Mircea BRIE\*

**Abstract.** *Beyond the many facets of the identity, one perspective of the identity cleavage in Western Balkans often appears to be very real and proven time and time again by more or less recent historical realities. Identity, be it that of an individual, of a group or of a community can generate both convergence and divergence in a rapport with the other. The other one, a true dichotomy, becomes the expression of the “one beyond” - beyond what is specific to me, to my identity. A border, be it symbolic or ideological, can thus be identified around such identity constructions.*

*Methodologically, the focus of our analysis falls primarily on the borders of identity arising from ethno-religious or cultural specificity, but also on the nature of mentalities specific to this area. Theoretically and methodologically, we must emphasize the fact that our attention is drawn by both general European identities together with the more particular one, that of the national, regional or local identity. The conceptual perspective confers a clear delineation and establishment of policy analysis, just to make the operationalization of concepts easier and more useful in terms of achieving the overall objective set. Our analysis aims at considering, from a spatial standpoint, to consider the realities of identity recorded in the area of Western Balkans.*

*For the purpose of a conceptual clarification and to respond to the methodological desideratum already announced, this paper makes comparative references to the case of the states of North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro or to the case of the Albanians in the Balkans. At a comparative level, the reality of identity cleavages, which often takes the shape of borders, is similar in the Balkans. A particular note given by the context is kept, namely the specificity and the geopolitics of the former Yugoslav space.*

**Keywords:** *border, identity, ethnicity, religion, Western Balkans, Albanian community, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro.*

### 1. Introduction and methodological framework

The fall of communism and Yugoslav disintegration have initially amplified, in a first stage, the process of identity emancipation and the emergence of new cleavages in the Balkan space.

Our analysis aims to consider the establishment of a conceptual link between the identification of borders/identity cleavages (identity polarization of the domestic society) and the identity realities present in the space of the Western Balkans states.

The focus of our analysis lies primarily on the identity borders generated by the specific ethno-religious, linguistic or cultural identity, but also by the nature of the mental

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\* Mircea Brie, PhD Professor at the University of Oradea, Department of International Relations and European Studies. PhD supervisor in the field of International Relations and European Studies, Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca. E-mail: [mbrie@uoradea.ro](mailto:mbrie@uoradea.ro).

specific to the area. This paper develops in a new methodological construction ideas and synthetic research contained in others previous paper on identity as a border in the space of Central and Eastern Europe (Brie, 2016: 359-381; Brie, 2021: 5-29).

Without aiming at analyzing the entire identity spectrum in the Western Balkans, throughout this study we want to identify *possible identity cleavages* that take the form of identity borders. The identification is accompanied by a process of conceptual analysis with comparative references.

Our *hypothesis* is built starting from the assertion that in the space of these states there are realities that converge towards the daily expression of some community-identity borders. These boundaries can be identified both in terms of ethno-national and linguistic identity and in terms of religious identity. In these situations, the political or geopolitical connotations and implications are very important and acquire the valences of some decisive factors in the identity development.

*Methodologically*, we specify that throughout this study we do not intend to solve in any way fundamental, existential problems or to clarify possible identity dilemmas older or newer controversies. For the purpose of a conceptual clarification and to respond to the methodological desideratum already announced, this paper makes comparative references to the case of the states of North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro or to the case of the Albanians in the Balkans. At a comparative level, the reality of identity cleavages, which often takes the shape of borders, is similar in the Balkans. A particular note given by the context is kept, namely the specificity and the geopolitics of the former Yugoslav space.

Our *objectives* are to analyze possible identity realities that can generate, at the societal level, certain cleavages that take the form of identity boundaries. Therefore, our debate is oriented towards the identification of these borders, to discuss them in terms of the possible cleavage they produce. It is necessary to specify that, in our assertion, the existence of an identity border does not necessarily imply a rupture, a discontinuity, but can also be interpreted as a cultural-identity contact area. Such a contact area can generate not only multiculturalism, but also the development of an intercultural society in which cleavages fade.

Throughout this extensive analysis, we propose a *general debate on identity issues*, often of great sensitivity in the space of the Western Balkans. In this sense, the approaches of conceptual analysis in each state are accompanied by comparative references similar or different realities as an expression and result from other Balkan states.

## **2. The regional and national context**

The dissolution of Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 90s created seven new independent states and have amplified the process of national emancipation and the emergence of new cleavages in the Balkans. After the armed conflicts that followed the initial proclamation of independence in several of these countries, a period of consolidation came, along with European integration as well as cooperation and reconciliation efforts. The gradual resolution of these conflicts has relieved the public sphere from excessive ethnic nationalistic discussions, which has been conducive to the emergence of civic identities and, with the further rapprochement to Europe, offering the prospect of European non-ethnic identities (Brie, Jusufi and Polgar: 2021). The European Union opted for a regional approach in this part of the continent, in order to achieve greater stability among the conflicted communities/states. In 1996 the European Union

made a differentiation between the two terms ‘South-East (SE) Europe’ and ‘Western Balkans’. ‘SE Europe’ refers to all of the countries from the Gulf of Trieste to the Black Sea, while Western Balkans consists of all of the former Yugoslavian states except Slovenia, plus Albania (Trenchov, 2012: 1-12). Basically we can say that the relations between the EU and the Western Balkans countries is developing and for that the European Union has adopted a good approach to the region because it has brought progress as well as cooperation between the conflicted countries. The main tool in this process, where we can see also great achievements are the bilateral and multilateral meetings organised by or with the support of the European Union where political leaders of the region gather and take common decisions that are valuable for the whole region (Alujevic 2012: 6-9; Brie, Jusufi and Polgar: 2021).

Timeline of the dismantling of Yugoslavia:

- June 25th, 1991: Slovenia and Croatia proclaim their independence => intervention by the federal army
- September 8th, 1991: Independence of the Republic of Macedonia/ today North Macedonia
- From March to April 1992, an even bloodier war spreads in Bosnia-Herzegovina
- March 1992 - September 1995 The siege of Sarajevo
- The Serb community, militarily backed by Belgrade, fought against Muslims and Croats, who had previously fought among themselves
- November 1-21, 1995, negotiations and the Dayton Agreement – Treaty signed to Paris (14 December 1995)
- Conflicts in Kosovo and NATO intervention in 1999
- February-August 2001, North Macedonia, the conflict between the government and ethnic Albanians, especially in the north and west of the country
- August 13th, 2001 – Ohrid Agreement
- June 3rd, 2006, the Montenegrin Parliament declared Montenegro's independence
- February 17th, 2008, Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia



**Map 1.** The Western Balkans region. Source: Faruk Hadžić (2021), SOF News

### 3. Identity as a border. Conceptual analysis

Since the nineteenth century, the European space has undergone an extensive process of identity transformation. The European societies are modernizing, and under the impact of modernization there are profound changes both at the domestic level and at the international level. The identity revolution was not only specific to the period of the second half of the nineteenth century, when the effervescence of the new led to the erosion of the old monarchical order of powerful governments. The peoples are developing an increasingly strong national consciousness, culminating in the principle of self-determination of the peoples, so much the scene of the treaties that regulated order after the First World War. Then one of the most visible transformations has in view the national and identity emancipation (Brie, 2023: 283).

Nowadays, the process continues and develops on new levels of identity. At the same time, more and more “border” cleavages are emerging within European societies. These boundaries are most often symbolic and ideological. In the contemporary period we are witnessing an effervescence of the national, despite the progress made at European level in terms of consolidating the European identity. The process of European construction was accompanied by a certain blurring of the national, at least at the level of expression of nationalist-extremist movements. European identity appears as a higher-ranking identity that reduces the forms of expression of national and regional identities. This is at least in theory. On the other hand, in the current context, we are entitled to believe that European identity has taken a form of manifestation in parallel with national or regional levels, without being in very close relationship with them. That is, the reduction or amplification of the forms of manifestation at one level does not lead to a counterweight at another level (Brie, 2018: 237).

At a *conceptual* level, identity constructions appear, apparently placed on the same level of analysis, they can have different connotations. Identity, regardless of the level of reporting (European, national or regional / local), is found as a form of expression in the public space despite universal trends, globalization or uniformity of values, characteristics or community expressions. The elements of ethno-religious identity are found in the global public space, inclusively in forms multiplied through the channels of global propagation. Therefore, not only the global increase itself, but also the particular, the specific.

The latter, often taking forms of extremism, nationalism, ethno-religious violence, are multiplied by gaining followers thousands of miles away. Then, the national and ethnic state, associated with the national territory, managed not only to survive the pressures of the “global society”, but also demonstrated an even greater capacity for affiliation. The *Identity globalization* has proven to be stronger in urban and industrialized societies, and where there are consistent rural areas, a rich heritage and cultural tradition, a resistance to globalization has developed. Thus, the local, national-cultural identity is more strongly preserved in the rural-agricultural environment and in the proximity of cultural sites (Brie, 2021). Such a reality does not exclude the possibility of the parallel development and consolidation of a European supranational identity. Conceptually, this seemingly antagonistic relationship appears: European identity versus national / local identity (Brie, 2016: 360).

We hereby propose three levels of analysis regarding the concept of identity: the European level, the national level and the regional level. The specialty literature captures the dispute over the establishment of the identity of a person or community. The process comprises two dimensions: self-identification and hetero-identification. In both

situations, both one's own identification and the identification made by someone else, the debate on identity involves both objective and subjective elements. Theoretical analyzes, on the other hand, seize a dispute around the subjective and objective dimension of identity. Unlike the concept of *national origin*, which refers to something given, inherited by birth, *national identity* is, above all, the expression of the consciousness of belonging to a cultural community that is defined as a political community (Brie, 2021).

Ernest Renan refers to this reality when he characterizes the nation, suggestively, as a “daily plebiscite” (according to Flóra, 2011: 114). The national identity in this case is related to the concept of nation. The latter one understood as a population that divides a territory (to which it relates through the historical dimension), myths and common historical memories, a mass culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for each member (the latter referring to the state political organization) (Brie and Blaga, 2015).

This analysis presupposes the existence of: 1. a segment of the population living in a certain territory; 2. a certain type of relationship that expresses the consciousness of identity and belonging, a “community spirit” (Brie and Blaga, 2015: 115).

Such a perspective on the nation is in line with the philosophy of the Westphalian state that focuses on the idea of state-nation-territory.

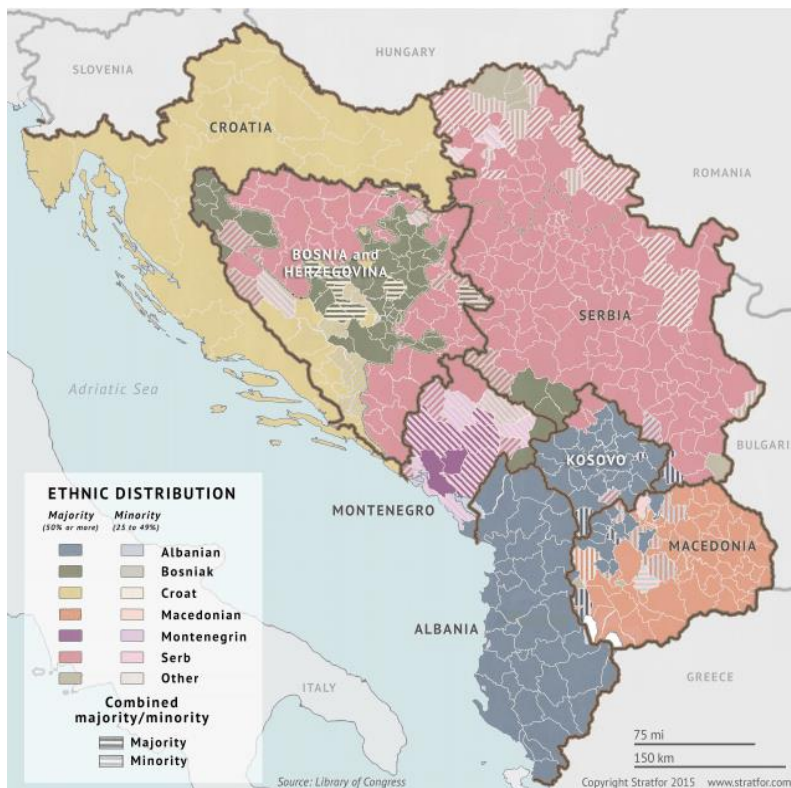
Conceptually, the entire identity building has at least two elements of specificity ever since its construction (Brie, 2016: 362-363): 1. national identity born of ethnic belonging; 2. national identity born of civic / citizen affiliation. In the first case, national identity serves a certain *ethnic group* that is often in competition with other ethnic groups (most often present in the same reference space). The perspective gives rise to nationalist-tribal expressions that may involve the exclusion of representatives of other ethnic groups. In the second situation, the *civic dimension* serves the state, leading most often to patriotism (the perspective is rather positive compared to the first situation when we are dealing with a perspective with negative connotations!) (Brie, 2021).

In most Western countries, the national identity has been built mainly around the identity of a citizen, and the territory of the status has consequently become the fundamental term of reference for the “national territory” - the *civic dimension of national identity*. Eastern Europe has had a different pattern of development, in which ethnicity, *the ethnic belonging or affiliation has fulfilled a fundamental role* in building the national identity – the *ethnic dimension of national identity* (Flóra, 2011: 116). Thus, the Western model of the nation emphasizes the central position of the national territory or homeland of the nation, while the Eastern model is concerned with ethnic origin and cultural ties.

In the Balkan countries, from the conceptual point of view, we can identify different kind of identity characteristics. There are a lot of cleavages or borders associated with the identity:

- ethnic identity
- religion identity
- linguistic identity
- alphabet identity
- citizen identity / civic identity
- cultural identity
- geopolitical identity

A fundamental feature of state-type nation-state constructions in Western Balkans is their permanent lack of legitimacy or, rather, their incomplete legitimacy. By identifying the state with a single national identity, the other national communities inevitably found themselves outside this process of legitimation, which constituted *a fundamental source of inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions*.



**Map 2.** Ethnic distribution in the Western Balkans. Source: United States. Central Intelligence Agency. Cartography Center, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2008620837/>, accessed on May 20, 2024

This reality has led to the sacralization of the state territory considered *national territory* (Flóra, 2011: 118-128) (the righteous property of a single nation/nationality!), while the cultural-historical philosophy is to delegitimize as much as possible the contribution of other national communities (Brie and Blaga, 2015). With regard to the European level of analysis on the concept of identity, the legitimate question is to what extent we are talking about a common European identity or, in antithesis, about the presence of identity borders in the European space. A certain identity cleavage can be observed between Western and Eastern Europe. This reality is given by the historical, cultural, religious and political heritage (Brie, 2021).

#### 4. Discussion. Analysis of the relationship between identity and borders

The young states born from the disintegration of Yugoslavia had to consolidate and strengthen their national identity by referring to its various associated forms. The *national identity based on citizenship*, respectively on civic identity, was a difficult fact to achieve where the ethnic and religious diversity was very great. The new reality: strong

identity cleavages, which culminated in violent inter-ethnic conflicts, have profoundly marked Balkan societies. The new geopolitical context, associated with a process of national-identity emancipation, have led to the redrawing of political maps in the Balkan space. Competition and mutual distrust marked the first two decades after the fall of communism. Proof of this are the complicated realities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia's disputes with Kosovo (Brie, Jusufi and Polgar, 2023: 2023, 185-209; Polgar and Brie, 2024). Strong identities used for political purposes were justified ethnically, religiously, linguistically or culturally. All this blocked the weak initiatives of the states that resulted in the ex-Yugoslav space to create a national identity given by citizenship.

Thus, in order to benefit the state, in order to defend and protect the state and national territory, the new national political regimes used various forms and characteristics of identity to strengthen national identity. In the absence of a solidarity based on citizen identity, identity borders were highlighted to more obviously separate communities built on other identity criteria. This results in forms of identity borders.

**The ethno-national identity border.** A strong identity supports and justifies a strong statehood. Logic has often been used by political regimes and vice versa, in order to justify national-state constructions newly appeared on the European map. Thus, the existence and survival of a political-state construction came to depend, among other things, on the need for an identity construction that would give an individuality in relation to neighboring states and peoples, drawing not only state borders but also identity borders.

Montenegro developed after independence a specific policy aimed at highlighting the unitary relationship of the triangle state, nation, citizenship (to be seen Chapter 2 additionally: *Transitional Triangle: State, Nation, Citizenship*, Džankić, 2015). The three dimensions must be mutually supportive and mutually reinforcing. If the national dimension is weaker, statehood and citizenship must sustain and justify national existence and consolidation. In Montenegro, statehood and citizenship support the nation in the absence of very clear distinctive landmarks that separate the ethno-religious and linguistic identity of the population of this state from the Serbian nation. From this perspective the identity construction is an ongoing, developing process. This process highlights not only a new ethno-national identity reality, but also an increasingly pronounced linguistic and cultural one (the latter by appealing to the historical heritage that would justify the current identity boundaries). In the opposite, there are many who claim that the language spoken is but the Serbian language, and that they are nothing more than Serbs belonging to the Montenegrin nation built on the basis of citizenship and affiliation to a distinct state space.

In North Macedonia there is a very interesting relationship between Macedonians and Albanians in terms of ethnic borders. Albanians are the largest ethnic minority in North Macedonia. According to the census held in 2002, Albanians comprised 25 percent of the population of North Macedonia. Unofficial estimates are higher due to large emigrant community (Visoka and Gjevari, 2013). Albanians live mainly in north-western parts of the country. The large majority of Albanians in North Macedonia are Muslims, but there are also some followers of the religions like the Bektashi dervish order, Roman Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity. North Macedonia has proven to be one of the examples of states that have more or less implemented a political system of consociationalism (McCrudden, 2006: 2). Since independence of North Macedonia in 1991, the country's politics has been heavily driven by both tensions and political



dialogue between the two largest communities of North Macedonia, Albanians and Macedonians. Among other notable crises include the Gostivar flag crisis in 1997 and the Kosovo war in 1999. The inter-ethnic tensions culminated with the ethnic conflict that occurred in 2001, which was the peak of the inter-ethnic struggle in the post-independence North Macedonia. The conflict left deep scars in the country's consciousness (Ringdal; Simkus and Listhaug, 2007). The Conflict ended with the signing in August 2001 the peace agreement, the Ohrid Framework Agreement, named after the city where it was concluded.

The Ohrid Agreement laid down rules for more protection and representation rights for the Albanians (Székely and Horváth, 2014). As a result of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, important guarantees were provided for ethnic Albanians, particularly as regards local governance, education, language use and participation in public life, including public-sector employment. The Agreement ceased the hostilities and led to the constitutional and administrative changes in order to meet the grievances of the ethnic Albanian and other minority groups. The Agreement opened a new era in North Macedonia's transition as it brought a major change in the national polity (Koneska, 2017).

At the Western Balkans level, the Albanian community is present in an extensive area in the southern part of the ex-Yugoslav space.



**Map 3.** Distribution of Albanians in neighboring countries. Source: [https://www.mapmania.org/map/70331/distribution\\_of\\_albanians\\_in\\_neighboring\\_countries](https://www.mapmania.org/map/70331/distribution_of_albanians_in_neighboring_countries), accessed in 12.09.2024.

In case of the Albanian community in the Balkans identity has produced some nuances in the sense that ethno-linguistically and religiously this community has managed to maintain a status that would ensure the preservation of cultural-community specificity. Identity has “migrated” to other associated forms of identity connected with citizenship, the civil one, and in some cases even global – European nature. This phenomenon is obvious in Kosovo where more and more citizens are attached to the citizen identity given by the identity-state value. If in this case the Kosovo national identity is associated with the Albanian one, in North Macedonia, the ethno-Albanian



community is subject to a form of national otherness by associating it with the Macedonian citizenship identity of the state. In the latter case, the partnership compromise for the well-being and preservation of statehood can lead to a mixed syncretic identity. The ethno-identity dimension (even linguistic or religious) takes a second role in the process of constructing national identity. The national identity is to acquire an increasingly pronounced civic dimension, the result of political compromise (Brie, Jusufi and Polgar: 2021).

The balance in inter-ethnic relations in North Macedonia is in the process of strengthening. The Albanian community, supported in its external efforts, has become aware not only of the force to influence the domestic policy of the state, but also of its limits.

***Language as a border: individuality and foundation of nation.*** Language was used as a political tool in the nation-building process. The linguistic solidarity of the distinct identity in relation to others causes the individual to position himself “inside the linguistic borders”, together with the linguistic community and in opposition to others. The linguistic individuality of a people has always played an important role in consolidating statehood. A distinct language leads to an additional force to preserve statehood. The close relationship between a state construction, an ethno-national identity, on the one hand, and the linguistic individuality of a population is not specific only to the contemporary period, not even to the modern one. It is deeply rooted in history, and has nothing to do with a specific geographical area. The language of one community has always been a form of individualization in relation to another community. It has always been a form of creating a consciousness of community belonging, of solidarity of individuals with the group. It is no wonder, therefore, that it has been used by certain states or political regimes to create and support identity disputes inside or outside a state, inside or outside communities (Brie, 2023).

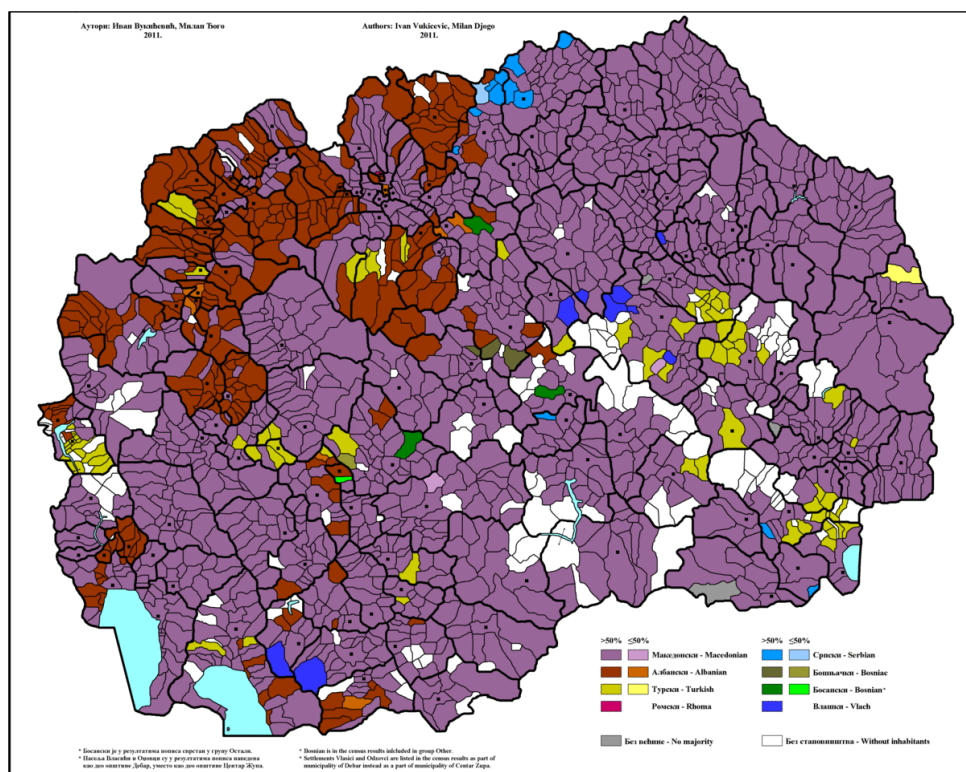
People who speak the same language, distinct from other communities they come in contact with, develop forms of community solidarity of identity origin. The biblical episode, also related in the Qur'an, of the construction of the Tower of Babel is very well known (The Bible, Genesis, chpt. 11). “*Let us build ourselves a city and a tower, the top of which may reach to heaven, and let us make a name for ourselves, that we may not be scattered over all the face of the earth!*” (The Bible, Genesis, chpt. 11: 4). “*Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language, and this is why they have begun; now nothing would stop them from doing everything they had in mind.*” (The Bible, Genesis, chpt. 11: 6) “*Let's descend upon them and confuse their language there, so that they don't understand each other's words! And the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they stopped building the city.*” (The Bible, Genesis, chpt. 11: 7-8). The biblical episode identifies from ancient times the strength of a linguistic community, of a people who speak the same language. They can work together, they can build something great, they can fight together, they can stay together - just because, and only and only if they speak the same language.

The others are not trustworthy, they cannot be from within, one has to separate oneself from them and find one's support only next to those who speak the same language with you. This foundation is not only the basis for the establishment of modern nations, but also both justifies and is an argument for the complicated policies that underlie identity revolutions, but also regimes or political movements that support separatist movements or the justice of new state constructions. Among the concerns regarding the

consolidation of the statehood of the new Balkan states there was the promotion of the linguistic individuality of the new peoples. Moreover, the movements of national emancipation or identity-national construction, started long before the act of independence, were based on and justified on ethno-national, religious, cultural and linguistic individuality (Brie, 2021).

In Montenegro, the public policies and public discourse have led to the assertion of linguistic individuality in relation to the Serbian language. If the Serbian language was initially accepted as the official language, the 2007 constitution requires the “Montenegro language” as the official language, which has caused dismay on the Serbian side (Morrison, 2018: 138).

*The case of Language dispute between North Macedonia and Bulgaria* (Brie, Jusufi and Polgár, 2023; Brie, 2023). North Macedonia has an identity dispute with Bulgaria which focuses on three demands of the Bulgarians: 1. the identity of the Macedonian language and the Bulgarian side demand that their neighbours formally recognize that its language has Bulgarian roots, respectively the official formulation of a “common history”, including identity; 2. the recognition and inclusion of the Bulgarian minority in the Constitution of North Macedonia (this claim would mean that the remaining majority is not Bulgarian as the more extreme Bulgarian claims sound - which would put an end to a nationalist dream of the Bulgarian side); and, a much vaguer formulation, 3. that North Macedonia renounces to what is called a “hate speech” against Bulgaria.



**Map 4.** Linguistic map of North Macedonia. Source: apud <https://www.deblauwetijger.com/macedonie-sociaaldemocraten-en-albanezen-gaan-regeren/>, accessed in 12.09.2024 (Ivan Vukicevic, Milan Djogo, 2011)

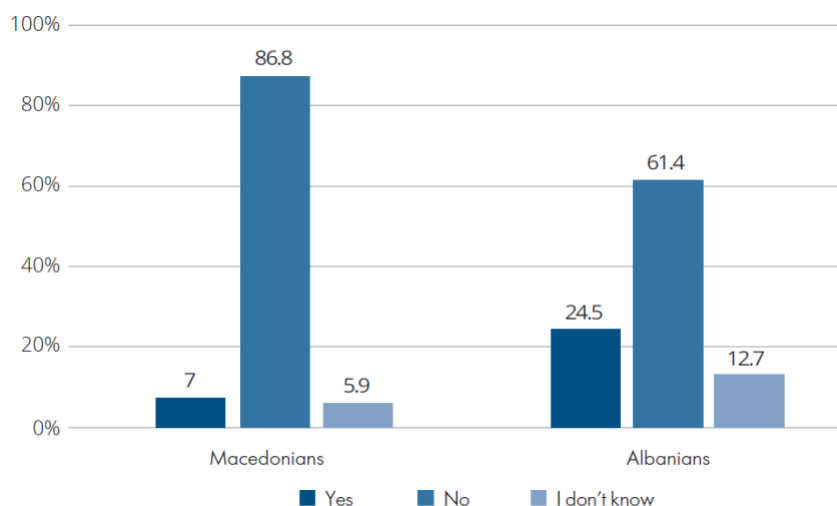
We will focus only on the issue of the language dispute, with reach the highest tension by Bulgaria's veto to oppose the start of negotiations of this state with the EU.

Bulgaria refuses to recognize the existence of a separate Macedonian language. It demands that the EU avoids using the term “Macedonian language”, and instead use the term “Official language of Republic of North Macedonia” (Phillips 2022). It insists that the Macedonian language is a Bulgarian dialect and ethnic Macedonians are a subgroup of the Bulgarian nation (Phillips 2022). North Macedonia and Bulgaria share linguistic and cultural similarities but also hold differing views on their history and language, dating back to the 19th century, when Bulgarian nationalists claimed Ottoman-ruled Macedonia as part of Bulgarian territory (Marusic 2017).

Despite a relative progress with the signing in 2017 of the *Treaty on friendship, good neighbourliness and cooperation* at civil society level, there has been no improvement in the perception of the required compromise in the relationship with Bulgaria (European Western Balkans, 2017; Treaty 2017). Moreover, on the basis of protracted disputes, public opinion has become less and less supportive of this compromise (Brie, Jusufi and Polgár, 2023).

From the data provided by the above-mentioned barometer, it appears that not even the Albanian minority supports a compromise of the historical narrative just for the sake of a compromise towards European integration (34.7% of Albanians and only 12.6% of Macedonians were in favour of a compromise). This despite the fact that among the ethnic Macedonians, the European integration of the country is supported by 63% of the respondents, but a very high number of ethnic Albanians (82%) support North Macedonia's membership in the EU (Damjanovski 2022: 4).

Public opinion is even less open to compromise regarding the Macedonian language (Brie, Jusufi and Polgár, 2023).



**Figure 1.** Do you think that North Macedonia should make a concession regarding the language in order to proceed with the EU integration? (%). Source: Velinovska; Nikolovski and Kirchner, 2022: 11

The results show a solid and almost undivided opinion among ethnic Macedonians who, by 86.8%, are not willing to make concessions on their language. A

concession of this kind is equally unacceptable for a smaller majority of ethnic Albanians (61.4%) (Velinovska; Nikolovski and Kirchner 2022: 11).

Bulgaria's veto was lifted only after mediation by the French Presidency of the EU Council in July 2022 (Council of the EU, 2022).

***The Cyrillic alphabet as an identity border.*** The alphabet is also used as a distinct identity element that can take the form of a cleavage such as identity boundaries. If in the case of the Albanians in the former Yugoslavia the use of the Latin alphabet was accompanied by the existence of a clearly distinct language, in the case of other peoples who were part of the former federal state the linguistic individuality was not so clear. For a long time, the linguistic individuality of Croats in relation to Serbs was linked to the use of the Latin alphabet by the former and the use of the Cyrillic one by the Serbians.

This dispute can be identified in the case of Montenegro (Morrison, 2018: 130-152) or the existence of a separate Bosnian language (Džankić, 2015: 48). The alphabet has played every time a very important role in the justice of the decision to draw a linguistic boundary of an identity nature.

The issue of the Cyrillic alphabet in the identity dispute of Bosnian Serbs has come back on the agenda. In this case, in addition to religion, the Cyrillic alphabet plays a very important role as a border of identity.

September 15-th 2021, on the occasion of Serbian 'Unity Day', MPs from the two parliaments of Serbia and Republika Srpska passed two laws to encourage the use of the Cyrillic alphabet in a new attempt to strengthen a common national identity (Serbia, 2021). All public institutions and societies, schools and universities, national associations and companies are constrained to use the Cyrillic alphabet (Cyrillic alphabet, 2021). Moreover, private companies are promised tax reductions provided they use this alphabet. The Cyrillic alphabet is part of an increasingly complex means that puts nationalism back in the complicated Balkan republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik, co-president of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, rekindled nationalism, sowing the seeds for the resumption of the conflict, with new demands for the separation of Republika Srpska (a region with 1.2 million inhabitants). The other two co-chairs, Sefik Džaferović (representative of the Bosnian community) and Jeliko Komsic (representative of the Croatian community), issued a joint statement expressing their support for the preservation of the current borders and their readiness to fight for it (Andrei, 2021).

***Religion as a border.*** In the Balkans, religion has always been an element of community individuality in relation to which the boundaries of identity-national communities, and even of states, have been drawn. In the former Yugoslav state, despite numerous efforts made after the Paris Treaties to achieve national cohesion, religion has always been an impediment to this success. Slovenes and Croats are mostly Catholic Christians, Serbs, Montenegrins and Macedonians are mostly Orthodox Christians, Albanians and Bosnians are Muslims. This mosaic picture is very visible, through the role played by religion in drawing identity borders, in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Serbs are Orthodox, Croats are Catholics, and Bosnians are Muslims. Despite efforts to standardize language, religion (but not only it!) it has kept the ethno-national communities distinct. Moreover, neither is there any longer the same unity within Orthodoxy itself, if we consider the case of the Church in Montenegro. Here an important part of the population reproaches the hierarchical superiority of the Serbian Church and challenges it (Brie, 2021).

## 5. Conclusion

The states of ex-Yugoslavia, as well as those of the former Soviet bloc, tried to develop a national identity that would serve the formation and consolidation of the national state. The process of national construction was marked by the use of instrumental identity constructions intended to highlight borders.

For this purpose, the ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious identity cleavages were used with the aim of consolidating the distinct national consciousness in relation to the neighbors.

Our research identified a similar behavior in the new Balkan states, but the expression of these identity borders took into account the demographic reality specific to each state.

If in North Macedonia the language of the Albanian minority in relation to that of the Macedonian majority was a clearly delineated issue and could not be contested, in Montenegro for example the spoken language is still called differently by Montenegrin citizens (some call it Serbian language, others Montenegrin).

Instead, the Macedonians have a linguistic identity dispute with the Bulgarians. Even if the cases are different, in both situations the politicians and leaders from Podgorica or Skopje resorted to messages of self-identification in relation to others through their own distinctive language. The process proved to be useful in the state-national construction process.

As in the case of language, religion was a strong identity element that showed the limits of the Balkan communities. When it was possible, this was instrumented as an additional identity for the purpose of national self-identification. If in North Macedonia or Kosovo, the Albanian Muslims were clearly delimited from the Macedonian or Serbian Orthodox Christians, in Montenegro the Orthodox Church was considered an extension of Belgrade's influence. The religious identity cleavage in relation to the national identity borders is even more evident in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Here, mainly, the Orthodox are mostly Serbs, the Catholics are Croats, and the Muslims are and the Muslims are Bosniaks, and vice versa. In this case, the double identity identification led to the highlighting of much stronger identity borders.

Our hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that realities are highlighted in these countries that converge towards the daily expression of community-identity borders. These cleavages can be identified both from the point of view of ethno-national and linguistic identity, as well as from the point of view of religious identity. In these situations, the political or geopolitical connotations and implications are very important and acquire the value of decisive factors in the development of the identity and construction of the national state.

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