

Citation style

Miškova, Diana: review of: Diana Miškova, *Beyond Balkanism. The Scholarly Politics of Region Making*, London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019, in: *Südosteuropa*, 68 (2020), 3, p. 467-476,
<https://www.recensio.net/r/19f4ac22c07242b9a169fbc687a94f8>

First published: *Südosteuropa*, 68 (2020), 3



copyright

This article may be downloaded and/or used within the private copying exemption. Any further use without permission of the rights owner shall be subject to legal licences (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).

easily with the diversity and dissension which will be as much their future as their past.⁶⁵ The Balkans deserve to be seen as an intriguing location in global history. I am pessimistic, though: how many scholars academically socialised in the West, and of the historiographic guild, will turn to Mishkova's book and subsequently engage in historiographic dialogue, which then might lead to real innovation? Even if the field of Balkan studies has undertaken several giant steps towards epistemological inclusion, with Diana Mishkova as one of its spearheads, scholars still have been conversing mainly among their 'area' peers, reifying the politics of region making. Colleagues from regions *beyond* the Balkans who start to 'think' the Balkans as much as Southeast Europeanists 'think' the 'West' are rare. Global history has not yet helped much here. But such thinking would be a substantial move forward.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Sabine Rutar Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies, Landshuter Str. 4, 93407 Regensburg, Germany. E-mail: rutar@ios-regensburg.de

DIANA MISHKOVA

Notions of Region and Practising Regional Studies

For the sake of lending some coherence to my response to the four comments, I will address first the observations concerning the notion of region. In a next step, I reflect on those comments that touch upon the practice of regional studies. First of all, however, I wish to thank the participants in this panel for engaging in this intellectual exercise circling around my book *Beyond Balkanism*.

It seems almost inevitable that both John Breuilly's 'comparative framework' and Sabine Rutar's 'symbolic geographies' should foreground western agency in region making—either as a 'pragmatic exercise of power' (Breuilly) or as resulting from 'Western hegemonic geopolitical reshuffling' (Rutar). This, as I have tried to survey in my book, is justified in terms of antecedence (almost all mesoregions were initially defined from without) and asymmetry in knowledge production, and is hence nothing that would be idiosyncratic of the Balkans. My work on the concepts and images of the Balkans, on the other hand, has convinced me that to understand the persistence of regional categories in our everyday speech and of regionalisation as a way of organising our knowl-

⁶⁵ Mark Mazower, Epilogue. Making Europe, in: Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent. Europe's Twentieth Century*, New York 2000 (orig. 1998), 395–403, 403.

edge of the world generally, much bigger weight should be assigned to the 'native' usages and meanings of these concepts and to the role they play in the 'native' social and political imagery. This no doubt adds to the instability and contingency of regions but also, and more importantly, to their unremittingly contested definitions, therefore shifting criteria for inclusion and exclusion. 'Regions thus do not emerge as objectified and disjointed units functioning as quasi-national entities with fixed boundaries and clear-cut lines between insiders and outsiders, but rather as flexible and historically changing frameworks for interpreting certain phenomena.'⁶⁶ A consensus transpires among the participants in the panel regarding the understanding of space and borders as hinging on the premises of their social production and the ideological underpinnings behind such production. Normative political and cultural presumptions have been spurring regions ever since antiquity: the original division of Europe into a 'civilised' South and a 'barbaric' North was later substituted by an equally moralistic East–West divide. Religious divides (Catholic Latin, Protestant Germanic, and Orthodox Greco-Slavic), often underscored by racial ones, have been similarly powerful engines of 'cultural-spiritual' regionalisations. The great turning point in the spatialisation of historical experience, however, coincided with the advent of the era of high modernity, and found its original form in the post-Enlightenment logic of organising knowledge along civilisational dividing lines. Temporal terms such as 'development', 'progress', 'conservatism', 'stagnation', and 'delay' acquired spatial embeddedness, and spatial terms such as 'the East', 'the West', 'the North', 'the South', as well as 'centre', 'periphery', 'borderlands', or just 'the lands beyond' became historical terms. The modern symbolic (hierarchically graded) map of Europe is the product of this peculiar merger of cultural-historical and spatial imaginations. John Breuilly is right when stating that only in modern times do the representations of place as lived experience and as instrument of power 'change, converge and are stabilised through scholarship and ideology'. The politicisation of regional terminology, however, did not come about before the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Until then, albeit driven by the great European states' growing economic and geopolitical interest in the Balkans, not only linguistics and folklore (or philology) but also 'scientific geography' had possessed an autonomous intellectual character.

The morphology of symbolic geography / region making suggests an intimate relation between the construction of space, on one hand, and the formation of identities and identity politics, on the other. Regional concepts are first of all products of cultural-historical ('civilisational') self-identification and

⁶⁶ Diana Mishkova / Balázs Trencsényi, *Conceptualizing Spaces within Europe. The Case of Meso-Regions*, in: Willibald Steinmetz / Michael Freedden / Javier Fernández-Sebastián, *Conceptual History in the European Space*, New York, Oxford 2017, 212–35, 217–218.

self-positioning (coupled with the mirrored positioning of the 'other'), while the 'reality' of regions resides in the real consequences of this signifying process, through which people conceptualise or envision their place in the world.

Turning for a moment to the embedded 'top-down' processes of boundary-making, I wish to answer John Breuille's question whether the Ottomans' division of their European acquisitions influenced later state borders, in a way analogous to the precolonial roots of apparently arbitrary colonial boundaries elsewhere. There is in fact little analogy here. The provincial units of the empire (*vilayets*) had little impact on later state divisions. Albeit formally part of the 'Concert of Europe', the Ottoman empire had little say in the drawing of the successor states' borders. 'Turkey-in-Europe' itself was conceived as an exercise of pragmatic power by the western powers, similar to the 'Middle East', 'Southeast Asia', etc., regional concepts Breuille refers to, however—and this is an interesting difference—one that was intended for an empire of a non-colonial, premodern type ruling over Christian populations. This goes some way in explaining the marginalisation of pan-nationalism in the Balkans: the early emergence of the modern Balkan nation states and the drawing of their boundaries were to a large extent the result of the inability of the great powers to agree on the partitioning of 'Turkey-in-Europe' between themselves, in contrast to Poland, for example. It should be noted, though, that pan-nationalism did not obtain in the Habsburg realm either. On the other hand, this left space for later balkanologists to treat Balkan nationalism and, by implication, nationalist violence, as a western importation, against which they could project the image of a pan-Balkan commonality, where also the shared divisive effects of this imported 'commodity' featured as a building element.

Returning to the morphology of region making, Béatrice von Hirschhausen observes that 'one of the possible research strategies enabling departure from the airbrushed image of a region is to take the observations of the actors and their practices as a starting point, that is the way in which they constantly situate themselves in regional frameworks'. For Guido Franzinetti, delving into institutionally and academically embedded conceptualisations of the Balkans is a way of understanding the 'Actually Existing Balkans'. I cannot agree more. To be sure, regionalisation often underpins or competes with other modes of self-description and may be more salient in cultural and political debates in certain periods than in others. The core question, as I see it, is who deploys, when and to what ends, (a particular) regional terminology and with what effect.

Hence my reading of Violette Rey's take on the Balkans, which she considers 'archetypal' for the whole of Eastern Europe, is more ambivalent than Béatrice von Hirschhausen's. (Had Routledge been slightly more lenient with the size of my book, Rey's interpretation would have found a place in it.) Rey professes an attempt 'to identify the spatial mechanisms that perpetuate the set of *features*

and give it such durability that they contribute to the construction of a durable and singular civilisational entity'. For her, *discontinuity* is 'the main Balkan property' with millennia-old roots, the major cleavages being wreaked by three religions and four alphabets and the 'distinct cultural attitudes' they shaped and which have been 'based on a geographical space with a surprisingly fragmented relief that gave a physical basis to the [internal] segmentations'. She conceptualises the spatial processes that underlie the 'individualisation' of the Balkans, meaning 'specific features with civilisational content', as encapsulated in its 'in-betweenness' (*espace entre-deux*)—a notion with a long pedigree in balkanist scholarship, which Rey defines as made up of three interactive components: 1) a space where developments are governed by external and competing forces stronger than inside forces—an asymmetry that produces internal fragmentations, discontinuities and instability; 2) a space where recurrent radical reversals engender a cyclical experience of time and prevent accumulation of development; 3) a space where all kinds of discontinuities further creativity but where these same discontinuities prevent their effective local implementation, thus engendering frustration. In the end,

'such spatial and temporal relations result in an abundance of differences and an exacerbation of otherness, an anxiety about destiny that is always unpredictable [...] a tension between territorial constructions in small-scale "cells" [territories of ethnic minorities] and very large-scale spatial organizations [e. g. religious denominations]; a tension that maintains hidden discontinuities, hinders the multiple diffusion phenomena through which evolutions and integration processes take place; a tension that thwarts medium-scale constructions [national states]; a tension that makes more exclusive the role of clan and community solidarity.'⁶⁷

I am with von Hirschhausen in recognising affinities here with the interwar phenomenological approaches to Balkanness (though Rey's hermeneutics is by far gloomier in that she sees the recurrence of the past as unheroic and regressive), with all the pros and cons of such a choice. Moving away from the 'objectivity' of the Balkans (though not from the objective forces that shape its intermediate situation) towards reenactment of its *singularité de destin* on an existential level deserves appreciation—a memorable paragon in this sense is István Bibó's *The Misery of the Eastern European Small States*.⁶⁸ But is it indeed the 'local's' understanding, or rather Rey's assumption that such a common

⁶⁷ Violette Rey, *Les Balkans, lecture d'un espace 'd'entre-deux', Anatoli. De l'Adriatique à la Caspienne. Territoires, politique, sociétés* 1 (2010), 45–56, 45–47; Violette Rey, 'L'entre deux' balkanique, *Geography, Environment, Sustainability* 3, no. 3 (2010), 32–41; Violette Rey, *Concepts flous pour réalités ambiguës, comment lire la balkanisation avec l'entre-deux, Anatoli. De l'Adriatique à la Caspienne. Territoires, politique, sociétés* 4 (2013), 93–107, 105–106 (emphases added).

⁶⁸ István Bibó, *A kelet-európai kisállamok nyomorúsága*, Budapest 1946.

understanding exists? I cannot do full justice to Rey's argument here but, analytically, I would have been more attracted to her approach had it been less holistic and metasocial: post-1989 electoral geography of Eastern Europe as often overlaps with former imperial divisions (Habsburg, Russian, Ottoman) as it crosses them; from a present-day perspective, the 'civilisational' difference ('discontinuity') between post-Habsburg Catholic-cum-Protestant Hungary and post-Ottoman Orthodox Romania looks much more negligible than it did in the 1990s (despite the impression conveyed by differences in architectural land- and urban skylines); to see a resemblance between small peasant land ownership coexisting with 'gigantic agricultural enterprises' in post-1990s Bulgaria and the land regime under the Ottomans needs a very high bird eye unobstructed by causal links—the land redistribution in the country after 1879 was as radical as the demolition of mosques, while across the region the post-1989 land redistribution was emphatically advertised as 'land *restitution*'.⁶⁹

All in all, Rey asserts a peculiar 'in-between' relation to time and space, which crystallises into the 'specific characteristic' of the area, ominously yet logically reenacting itself. A cross-regional comparison might have suggested, and not only in this case, a more differentiated vision: compared to present-day Spain, 'in-between' Poland appears to be pretty well-integrated, with barely any tension between territorial constructions of different scale and perceptions of unpredictability, even if the ghosts of supremacist Germany and Russia still loom large in Polish political and social imagery. More crucially in terms of region making, in an *espace entre deux* marked by such fractures and discontinuities, can we talk, together with Rey, of a shared perception of a *singularité de destin* of its inhabitants (e. g. of the Czechs, the Romanians, the Albanians and the Greeks) other than that relating to the fractures and discontinuities themselves? Eastern Europe (and the Balkans) appears as a zone of divergences and disjunctures, but also of encounters and transfers, where borders often act as interfaces, defining rather than dividing spaces. This being said, I understand the reasons for Béatrice von Hirschhausen's affinity with such an approach: Rey's sensitivity to the 'inescapable ambiguity of these geographical situations', her reluctance to fall back on multicultural relativism or (geographic or historical) monocausality, and her ethical engagement with 'understanding the dilemmas' of the people living in these areas clearly dissociates her interpretation from popular 'operational simplifications' à la Huntington and his like.⁷⁰

Sabine Rutar's focus on the Balkans as borderland has a precedence in Józef Chlebowczyk, for whom the whole area bordering the Baltic, Adriatic, Aegean, and Black Seas presents a coherent analytical unit encapsulated in the cate-

⁶⁹ Rey, *Concepts flous pour réalités ambiguës*, 97–100.

⁷⁰ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York 1997.

gory of borderland, denoting 'areas where different linguistic-ethnic groups, nationalities and ethnic communities come into contact and coexist' and, as such, 'develop in a specific way'.⁷¹ Borderlands in some recent writings have morphed, tellingly, into 'bloodlands'.⁷² For Rutar, borderlands warrant above all a different kind of history writing and, more generally, of *doing* regional studies—an issue discussed by all four commentators to which I now turn. Starting with practitioners, Rutar reflects on the centrality of the relationship between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in the production of regional knowledge. In the book, I flinched from undertaking a sociology of this production, while being keen to draw attention to the entanglements between internal and external perspectives on two levels: more explicitly, in terms of conceptual exchange and, less so, in terms of personnel (the massive presence of diaspora / émigré scholars from the region in research centres outside the region). With an eye to the contemporary situation, Rutar wishes that I had been 'less modest' in *linking* the diaspora back to those who 'stayed on' (like myself) on the premise that 'academic mobility and the "brain drain" from the Balkans over the last thirty years has "bounced back home", so that, as a result, notions of the Balkans have been enhanced both from without and from within'. As a result, we can expect that a 'more conceptually conscious dialogue on the symbolic geographies' will come about.

This is a singularly sanguine supposition which I wish tallied better with the actual situation, at least in Bulgaria. I shall limit my comment to the field of history writing since it is the main one in this country (next to a few language departments) where the Balkans features as an object of institutionalised academic study. On the whole, during the last couple of decades we have witnessed a powerful renationalisation of the public and academic spheres across Eastern Europe. History writing, which never eliminated the national grand narratives, has been particularly affected by this renationalising trend. Stripped of political relevance, the institutes and departments of Balkan studies have suffered financial deprivation and a shortage of cadres. Rather than diminishing it, academic mobility has rendered the gap between indigenous and exogenous historical knowledge production more conspicuous. Instead of cross-fertilisation, as per Rutar's rational expectation, one may actually speak about two parallel historiographical cultures: a 'self-reflective' one ('the driving force behind much that has been genuinely innovative and conceptually convincing', as Rutar envisions it), produced mainly, though not exclusively, outside of the country or by returnee foreign-trained scholars, typically with no or precarious institutional embedment, and a 'self-centred' ('exclusivist and

⁷¹ Józef Chlebowczyk, *On Small and Young Nations in Europe. Nation-Forming Processes in Ethnic Borderlands in East-Central Europe*, Wrocław 1980, esp. 9–40.

⁷² Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, New York 2010.

essentialist') national one produced in the state academic institutions. The two cultures exist in parallel, barely 'touching' each other, and when they happen to meet—an ongoing case is the asymmetric dispute attending the Bulgarian–North Macedonian historical commission set up to solve the most conflictual issues between the two national narratives as a precondition to North Macedonia's opening pre-accession talks with the EU—the result is a 'short circuit' explosion, mutual rejection and crude politicisation of the debate. I cannot go here into the reasons for this state of affairs in the history departments and the profession generally, but it is quite telling that the four volumes of the *Entangled Histories of the Balkans*, on which Rutar seems to have pinned hopes for change, were met with silence at home: although between 2013 and 2019 all volumes were translated into Bulgarian, they spurred no real debate, let alone visible impact. The favoured reaction of the local historical mainstream to this kind of 'provocation' is to ignore and drown it in a sort of show of mute contempt. (The only [positive] reviews came from a small circle of literary scholars.) Practitioners of Balkan studies outside the region, on the other hand, have been strongly appreciative. As for my personal location in this context it is, and is largely perceived locally as, extraterritorial, due to my anchorage in the Centre for Advanced Study—an international academic body committed to 'self-reflective' research. Guido Franzinetti is right to stress the importance of this cultural and institutional setting for my formation as a historian of the Balkans and a professed mediator between domestic and foreign academia. In a broader sense, however, the Centre, although structurally important as a 'subversive pocket' for local scholars, by its sheer size and positionality is hardly able to effect systemic change.

John Breuilly's concern with the link between scholarship and politics in region making is of different nature, pondering the role of historical linguistics and 'dialect continua', in particular. I concur with the general orientation of his argument, yet would be cautious to project the 'wave theory' onto the Balkans save, admittedly, between Serbian and Bulgarian. We are faced with a region where languages belonging to different language families (i. e. with 'different rules and vocabularies', two of which, Greek and Slavic, were codified very early on as written *and* liturgical) interacted in the course of many centuries so intensely as to produce morphological similarities between themselves. Nineteenth-century linguists tended to attribute these similarities to a common origin of all these languages, but by the 1920s this theory was abandoned in favour of the *Sprachbund* (linguistic area), which attributes the similarities between so dissimilar tongues to a long-standing practice of bi- and tri-lingualism. Therefore, we are still dealing with interaction across language boundaries that 'provides an opportunity for transnational accounts of language and cultural history generally', however, one abiding not to a 'wave theory' but

to multi-lingualism at an everyday level. It is, on the other hand, not hard to envisage the political implications of a Slavic 'dialect continuum' — the notion of 'Slavic Europe' in both the Russian (Slavophile) and the French (qua counterforce to 'Germandom') political vocabulary being one of the conspicuous ones.

As an approach to 'lived spaces' — different from though not necessarily opposed to symbolic geography — the phantom borders one is fascinating. To quote von Hirschhausen, the phantom borders approach considers regional differences the result of 'a bottom-up process mediated through the everyday behaviour of people [...] focused on the experience of the actors'; phantom borders (i. e. the selectively reactivated boundaries of extinct empires) are being, interactively, 'imagined' (produced and passed on discursively), 'perceived as experience' and 'designed' through territorialisation processes.⁷³ At this stage of testing this approach on the ground, I encounter several riddles that need to be solved before trying to gauge the applicability of this approach on a mesoregional scale. Supranational regions (such as the Balkans or Central Europe) are 'imaginable' but not liable to be 'experienced' or 'designed' in the way a microregion or one 'delineated' by a particular landscape (e. g. architectural style like in Oltenia and Banat) can be. A mesoregion stretches far beyond the living space of actors, it lacks administrative borders, internal coherence, and territoriality (that is, effective control of public and political life). A mesoregion is, in this sense, a discursive construction par excellence. Phantom borders, I would surmise, can reactivate former divisions effected by empires, states, political regimes or conflicts, but it is hard to imagine that they can chart a supranational (meso) region that transcends such divisions. The irregularity and contingency with which phantom borders resurface preclude more or less reliable cartographic mappings. Such radical de-essentialisation of space and borders, namely knowing how those we seek to understand interpret themselves and their world, is, arguably, the most attractive aspect of the approach. But it also invites us to grapple with some taxing issues. What does the randomness of occurrence of phantom differentials in some instances and non-occurrence in other instances tell us about the nature of these borders and the identities they perform? If there are structural or material reasons that explain the occurrence of such differentials (e. g. the houses in Banat appear structurally more suitable for reconstruction than those in Oltenia, where it makes more sense to build a new house than refurbish the old one), how come that people explain them in terms of cultural legacy? When we are talking, not of material or institutional, but of cultural legacies, the question of *transmission* becomes crucial. It is in this sense significant that, after 1989, the imagery of 'Central Europe' and the

⁷³ For the full elaboration of the approach, cf. Béatrice von Hirschhausen et al., 'Phantom Borders' in Eastern Europe. A New Concept for Regional Research, *Slavic Review* 78, no. 2 (2019), 368–389.

Habsburg nostalgia, which dissident intellectuals had spurred in the 1980s, owed their survival to intellectuals from the one-time peripheral provinces of the Habsburg Empire, like Banat. The cultural programme of the Romanian *A Treia Europă* ('The Third Europe') research group based in Timișoara (in Banat) tried not just to resurrect their region's Central European identity but to redefine Central Europe by repositioning the 'imperial margins' as its cultural centre, detached from the 'Mitteleuropean dictate' of Vienna and Budapest, with the former Habsburg provinces of Bukovina (today part of Romania and Ukraine) and Banat now appearing as the quintessential Central European zones of interethnic, multilingual, and cultural convergence.⁷⁴

So, is the Banatian villagers' modernising self-perception as Habsburg heritors the product of a specific relation to time and memory (as Rey would probably have it), an extrapolation from a baroque landscape tangibly superior to a predominantly wooden one, or a *vulgata* of the public discourse of 'The Third Europe'? All of these might interconnect and reinforce each other, but if we want to come to grips with the core question raised at the beginning—who deploys, when and to what ends, (a particular) regional terminology and with what effect—we need to be able in each case to identify the specific channels of transmitting images, legacies and collective memory of spaces that exceed the living one. The recent revival of area studies (which now show responsiveness to the local perspective) bears witness to the value of regions as analytical categories, above and beyond their prominence in political and everyday parlance. And as John Breuilly's intervention suggests, cross-regional (and, I would add, intra-regional) comparisons can supply insights and knowledge that may otherwise remain hidden. For now, my preference stays (as in the conclusion of the book) with regions understood as open-ended spaces charted by long-standing (and usually asymmetrical) encounters—contacts, interactions, movements, exchanges, and transfers—and as a starting point for engaging with shifting spatial frameworks (some reaching out to Europe, others to the Near East), depending on the period and the problematique. Not as cultural areas, but, to borrow from Artemis Leontis's projection of the Mediterranean, as 'the meaningful background for certain ways of thinking and living, an entanglement of differences and a fine, fragile mesh of interdependencies, a set of interconnected histories'.⁷⁵ Historians of Europe may continue

⁷⁴ Adriana Babeți / Cornel Ungureanu, eds, *Europa Centrală. Nevroze, dileme, utopii*, Iași 1997; Maciej Janowski / Constantin Iordachi / Balázs Trencsényi, Why Bother about Historical Regions? Debates over Central Europe in Hungary, Poland and Romania, *East Central Europe. L'Europe du Centre-Est. Eine wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift* 32, no. 1–2 (2005), 5–58, 40–42, DOI: 10.1163/18763308-90001031.

⁷⁵ Artemis Leontis, Mediterranean Topographies before Balkanization, in: Mauro Peressini / Ratiba Hadj-Moussa, eds, *Mediterranean Reconsidered. Representations, Emergences, Recompositions*, Quebec 2005, 246.

to overlook the European borderlands. This state of the art needs to be faced up front by continuously grappling with the major intellectual challenge that my fellow-regionalist Balázs Trencsényi formulated as ‘how to produce regionally relevant knowledge without closing ourselves into a “ghetto” of regional specialists, and how to enter the global debates without just “reproducing” the mainstream intellectual trends that circulate in the Western “core(s)”’.⁷⁶

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Diana Mishkova Centre for Advanced Study, 7 Stefan Karadja Str., vh. 3, 1000 Sofia, Bulgaria. E-mail: mishkova@cas.bg

⁷⁶ Balázs Trencsényi, *Beyond the Region? Transnational Studies in East Central Europe*, lecture at ‘Reimers Konferenzen Revisited’, Forschungskolleg Humanwissenschaften der Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main, Bad Homburg 29–30 June 2015.