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## **The Tug-of-War of Balkan Identity: The Rejection and Perpetuation of Ethnonationalism Online**

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# Universiteit Leiden



*“The Tug-of-War of Balkan Identity: The Rejection and Perpetuation of Ethnonationalism Online”*

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**Abstract:**

The topic of identity, nationalism, ethnic conflict, in the Balkans have been extensively researched. However, with the ever-growing use of social media for political discourse, and to inform the public, not much has been researched on how the nationalist tendencies that led to the wars of the 1990s have been incorporated by Balkan users online. Through a combined online and offline research approach that employed ethnographic methods for each, this research sought to compare the influences of nationalist political discourse and how reconciliation is approached. The offline research conducted focused on the everyday symbolic and material reality after the war in Bosnia, and how reconciliation is felt by my interlocutors there. The online research was done by observing a particular Subreddit called r/Balkans\_irl, where users create nationalist content that is viewed by some as reclaiming their identities through irony, and as offensive toxic humor by others. This research is significant due to the importance the Western Balkans have gained geopolitically over recent years, particularly after of the war in Ukraine. Despite the negative attitude the EU rightfully has towards its domestic nationalist sentiments, it is important to understand why nationalism has been such a focal point in the region rather than simply trying to get rid of it.

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## 1. Introduction

When one lands in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia I Herzegovina, something that's noticeable is how small the airport is for a country's capital's airport. This at least was my first remark. Going through customs was straightforward since there were only two agents checking people in. The compact feeling of the airport was also accompanied by a lack of flags or anything significantly "Bosnian" you'd expect landing in a country's capital's airport. This was different to what I had observed at the Zagreb airport whilst waiting for my flight to Sarajevo; Zagreb's airport is as patriotic as it gets. The Franjo Tuđman Airport in Zagreb was named after the controversial Croatian leader that began Croatia's independence in the 1990s. Controversial due to his adoption of Ustaše symbols like the Croat checkered emblem, and his use of Croat nationalism to push the country to fight Serbia (Hedges, 1997). Thus, seeing the Franjo Tuđman Airport ornately decorated with of commonplace self-representations of identity such as the Croatian checkered flag which was used to represent the Croat armed forces and the Ustaše, along with statues and portraits of Tuđman himself. The Franjo Tuđman airport in Zagreb along with its symbolism romanticizes a part of its history that by Croats can be viewed as their independence and a celebration of its freedom fighters (Đurašković, 2018), but this also felt contradictory since symbols like the checkered flag were used during the Croat collaboration with the Nazis during WWII (Đurašković, 2018). However, this perception of Croat symbols can be interpreted differently by people like Serbs and others who view these symbols as provocations through the glorification of alleged war criminals that perpetrated supposed war crimes during the second World War and the Yugoslav wars. This contrasts heavily with Sarajevo's airport, which did not have these nationalist dog whistles or any type of symbolism due to the troubles between the three main ethnic groups in the country; if one tried to impose its ethnic symbols in a public service like an airport, bus terminal, or other public spaces, it would draw heavy criticism and would antagonize the other two ethnic groups in the country (Lakic, 2017).

As this suggests, tensions over national identity remain prevalent in the Balkans. However, at the same time, there is a drive towards forms of supranational identification. For example, the Balkans have been slowly and steadily incorporated into the project that is the European Union (EU). The region has witnessed a drawn out and complex accession processes and has been scrutinized by those within and outside the EU. With most of the region being included to varying degrees into the EU, the focus has been on the Western Balkan countries of Bosnia I Herzegovina (BiH), Northern Macedonia (NM), Serbia, Albania, Montenegro, with Croatia having fully entered at the start of 2023. This region has had a traumatizing past in recent history after the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the reinvigorated ethnic hostilities that came with it. The ethnonationalist focus weaponized by political and military elites at the time to consolidate public opinion throughout the republics has created a heavy political focus on ethnic identity, complicating post-war relations and hindering the pursuit of politics disconnected from ethnic identity. This focus has characterized the Balkans as a dangerous place of conflict and ethnic cleansing, a perception that has altered the international perception of the region through its nick name of, the “powder keg” of Europe. Moreover, when a region becomes divided into hostile ethnic or culturally different entities it is usually characterized as being ‘Balkanized’ (Schadomsky, 2021). This wasn’t always the case for the Western Balkans. Authors such Laušević (2000), Doubt & Tufekčić (2019), Baskar (1999) and others raise how Bosnian communities before the establishment of the Bosnian political entity were polyethnic. Sergej Kreso, a Bosnian filmmaker that has made films looking at music and identity, told me:

*“The US always presents itself as a ‘melting-pot’ of cultures, yet there is clearly segmentation in cities like New York. Sarajevo on the other hand has had its citizens*

*coexist since the Ottoman occupation in the 1500s- peacefully sharing a city and setting up Mosques and Catholic/Orthodox churches relatively close to each other.”*

Today, with the prospects of full EU membership for other Balkan states has led to external pressures in the region to foment a different kind of Supra-national EU identity to counter the weaponization of ethnicity and reduce the risks of regional violence. The process of Europeanization typically offers political and economic transformations often overlooking a state or group’s apprehension to take on the European identity that comes with these reforms (Eriksen 2015, 195). This influence on identity that the process of Europeanization has is noteworthy in the Balkans, since as previously explored, the region and its peoples have a deeply embedded and well-established sense of self that has been developing for centuries. Thus Balkan identity is not just being negotiated between ethnonationalists and those that seek to challenge them, it is being negotiated in the context of increasing efforts to instill a European identity as EU members.

The aim of this thesis is therefore to explore how Balkan people adopt and play with these nationalist identities, using stereotypes to reinforce and challenge these identities. Instead of undergoing physical field research, this thesis researches online spaces. This is because the online space is one where people from multiple countries are mixing, and thus, is a place where one can examine the tensions between national and supra-national identifications. The main research question posed in the thesis is:

*How do people from the Balkans articulate and negotiate with national identity on Reddit, and what does this say about identity in the Balkans?*

This question is explored with a sub-set of people who are international but also play with national representations online. With a range of users that are either from the Balkan Diasporas, Westerners, Balkan citizens, and other types of migrants. The Subreddit itself is an international space that hosts a plethora of users from different backgrounds. Since the Subreddit is organized by the community itself and the moderators, it heavily encourages users to adopt national stereotypes not just in their user profiles on the Subreddit but in the humor that is used as well. This makes the Subreddit r/Balkans\_irl an appropriate place to examine how users and people in general think and engage with stereotypes, interethnic relations, or geopolitical issues in the region. Therefore, this thesis seeks to understand how Balkan identity, its conception, and discussion are being changed by online users and follows a few sub questions:

- How do Redditors express their ethnic/national identity through symbols, language, and cultural references?
- What patterns emerge in discussions on historical events, political conflicts, and cultural heritage that reflect the complexities of national identity in the Balkans?
- How do these redditors navigate and negotiate their identities when engaging with users from other Balkan and foreign countries?
- In what ways do online interactions on Reddit contribute to the construction or deconstruction of stereotypes and prejudices related to national and potential supranational identities in the Balkans?

Through these questions, the thesis argues that with the advent of the internet, these ethnonationalist identities have been taken to forum where users employ this ethnonationalism through humor and online content to at times reinforce and challenge these identities in the name of commonality. Through the Othering this ethnonationalism creates, Subredditors that I engaged with use commonly known



stereotypes of Balkan peoples as a sort of inside joke within the broader online Balkan community. This humor leads to ironic and unironic usages of harmful stereotype, which attracts a broad range of online netizens from around the world. This tension between the ironic and unironic use of stereotypes and ethnonationalism by users on the Subreddit comes at a time when there are renewed efforts to overcome national differences through accession into the EU's supra-national identity. The tension between these phenomena offline and online offer an opportunity and present a need to better understand Balkan identity politics.

## **2. Contextualizing the Research**

### **2.1. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework employed by this thesis is composed of recurring concepts found throughout academic literature on ethno-nationalism and political discourse. The concepts employed in this thesis to be defined and characterized in this section are:

- *Ethno-nationalism*
- *Identity Construction*

To establish the theoretical use of the term ethno-nationalism in this paper, its important to break down the definitions that compose it. The terms ethnicity and nationalism are fuzzy when it comes to their definitions. However, this thesis views ethnicity as it was defined in Chandra (2006); an identity founded on commonly held traits associated with the descent of a group. Other articles such as Karin Dyrstad also suggest that ethnicity is not a static entity, but a dynamic one whose salience and defining characteristics depend on the context it is in (2012, 818). Nationalism is term that can be defined in many ways by different academic fields. One aspect raised by Dyrstad (2012) is that Nationalism is often mixed up between nationalism as loyalty to a

state or nationalism as loyalty to a particular group; which distinguishes itself as an ethnic, ideological, or religious groups among others (Pickering, 2007). This thesis thus defines ethno-nationalism as a form of loyal to a nation imagined as comprised of one particular ethnic group, where group loyalty is much stronger than loyalty to the state (Dyrstad, 2012). One similar definition quoted in Dyrstad (2012) texts is Dekker, Malová & Hoo-gendoorn (2003), where ethno-nationalism is defined as *“feeling a sense of belonging to a particular 'nation' with a common origin, wanting to keep that origin, wanting to keep that 'nation' as pure as possible, and desiring to establish and/or maintain a separate and independent state for that particular nation.”* The use of this concept in the context of the Balkans is due to the irredentist nature of the conflict flashpoints over the past years, particularly in Bosnia and Kosovo. The use of identity is thus heavily politicized, making it an important future indicator for the digital ethnography this thesis goes into.

The concept of identity has no standard definition, the way this thesis approaches the concept however defines identity construction along the parameters set out in Vezovnik & Šarić's (2017) article titled *“Introduction: Constructing Balkan Identity in Recent Media Discourses.”* In this article, Vezovnik & Šarić (2017) state that the process of identity construction is not a solid, rigid category people are simply placed into, but more as a “dynamic, context -dependent one that is always linked to the creation of difference-an image of the Other is needed to create and manifest one's own identity” (Vezovnik & Šari 2017, 237). The Othering in this definition is also used in the thesis to reinforce similarities within an ethnic group through a dichotomy of “us versus them.” As much as Othering is about determining who belongs in a collective, it also establishes who is excluded. In the Balkans, this Otherization is an important aspect of identity construction because of how deliberate and systematic this Otherization was done in countries like the ex-Yugoslav states. The repercussions of this collapse had

significant social, political, economic, and cultural changes that have strongly impacted the wider European sociopolitical landscape. These identity construction dynamics don't apply to just inter-ethnic/state in the Balkans, these also apply in the broader context of EU integration which is also a project in identity building (La Barbera 2015, 617). These concepts of ethnonationalism and identity-making are linked to the research question because of the large part that ethnonationalism takes in identity-making in the Balkans. This ethnonationalism heavily influences the identity-making process by prioritizing ethnic politics and sentiments, which emphasizes the dichotomy between those that belong in a group and those that don't. This Othering between Balkan peoples has created a tense geopolitical situation in the region, where people feel like if war broke out again, they would have to rally and fight for their specific ethnic group. This is why these concepts are important in this research, as ethnonationalism plays a major role in predetermining interactions and perceptions between Balkan peoples, and would be the independent variable when answering how people articulate and negotiate this national identity on Reddit. The concept of identity-making would be the focus when answering the second part of the question. How people articulate and determine their national identity on the Subreddit will help understand what that process means for Balkan identity, exploring this heavily studied topic but from an approach that focuses on digital communities.

Academic research on Balkan identity can be dated back to long before the era of Yugoslavia and the Cold War, the region has had a tradition of research and exploration of its regions and people dating back to the 1800s. In the late 1800s, the Kingdom of Serbia committed itself to elevate the study of folk life and customs of the Serbian people through the practice of ethnology (Bošković 2008, 158). This Balkan 'Ethnology' that was popularized in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the Orthodox communities in the Balkans sought to understand the 'Volksgeist' (Spirit of the People) to create a sense of identity

that would set them apart in a part of the world fraught with foreign occupation and conflict (Lomonosov 2021). This practice of ethnology through the works of writers like Jovan Cvijić (1856-1927) and his book *The Balkan Peninsula*, or Tihomir Đorđević's (1868-1944) research delved into the interdependencies of culture and environment, developing different "character types" of the people in the Balkans. For instance, in Đorđević's historical studies of Serbia and Serbian literature between 1815 and 1839 he emphasizes that the 'true' nature of Serbian tradition can only be found in its rural villages, stressing the purity and 'nobility' of the Serb peasant character (Čolović 1995b, as cited in Bošković, 2005). Despite the recognition in Europe that these works received, several were criticized for their evolutionist descriptions; glorifying Serbs whilst demeaning other Balkan peoples (Čolović, 1995). The conclusion of this evolutionist approach was that the most advanced Balkan character type was the central regions of Serbia, also referred to as the Dinaric types (Bošković 2008, 158). This trend would gain popularity in Serb academic circles, paving the way for the "Serbian Golden Age" of ethnology; a trend that would lead to biased and often racist conceptualizations of people like the Croats, the Serbs, Macedonians, and Albanians. Some of these other works by authors such as Jovan Erdeljanović (1874-1944) who worked at the University of Belgrade tried to propagate the idea of ethnology as a scholarly discipline (Bošković 2008, 159), and would perpetuate this frowned upon evolutionist approach to ethnological fieldwork. His book *Osnove Etnologije* (1932) was written in the effort to make ethnology more accessible, creating a distinction between ethnology as a general science and ethnography as the "science of peoples" (Bošković 2008, 159). Despite the controversial approaches taken in these ethnological works, these had lasting consequences on the different terms and concepts considered in Serbian and broader Yugoslav ethnologies to come.

These initial works were not written to simply educate and establish records of the peoples in the Balkans. The writing and depictions of others across the Balkans led to the stereotypes and ethnic notions that were employed during and particularly after the war (Kitromilides, 1996 185-186). The way politicians weaponize identity and perpetuate stereotypes is by referring to the atrocities committed during wars by another group onto their perceived ethnic group, or to scapegoat ethnic minorities as causing a political crisis or creating some problem for the government, effectively redirecting potential criticisms of their own government actions. One tactic employed by Eurosceptic Balkan politicians more and more is the excuse that the EU meddles in Balkan affairs (Zaba & Zivanovic 2017), using membership negotiations to hold funding or hold people in the Balkans hostage. These are ways that some of my interlocutors explained these stereotypes are employed, driving an even bigger wedge between the peoples and nations in the Balkans and posing more resistance to the EU project in the region. How these identity dynamics change or persist impact inter-ethnic relations moving forward will also determine how these identities participate in the cultivation of supra-national ties with the EU or amongst themselves.

## **2.2. Research Methodology**

Digital ethnography is a field of inquiry that has already been established and has its own practices and preferences, with a well-established anthology of works (Barendregt, 2021). With the growing trend of technology becoming a larger part of our lives, and the recent acceleration of this trend due to COVID, the use of digital ethnography has been reinvigorated (Barendregt, 2021). The challenges digital ethnography has is that it challenges the norms as to what counts as the “field of study” and what “full immersion” is (Barendregt, 2021; Wang & Liu 2021, 3). Digital ethnography is a component within a more holistic approach that connects audiovisual and digital ethnography (Grasseni et al, 2021). Digital ethnography allows researchers to examine

how we live and research ever-changing digital environments. There are varying definitions of ethnography. Definitions such as O'Reilly (2005) tend to be more open, with ethnography being "iterative-inductive research (that adapts in design to the matter being studied), drawing on a family of methods that acknowledges the role of theory as well as the researcher's role, viewing humans as part object/subject" (O'Reilly 2005, 3). The shift to digital ethnography however is argued by Pink (2016) to make parts of O'Reilly's definition more conditional on our knowledge of the ways digital media involves an ethnography that is "direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives and cultures" (O'Reilly, 2005); what being digitally engaged actually means in the equivalence she states as "watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions" (O'Reilly, 2005); and where we would want to go beyond "producing a richly written account that respects the irreducibility of human experience" (O'Reilly, 2005). The point with digital ethnographic research is that as a researcher you would be immersed in digital spaces over a prolonged period not just to observe what people say online but looking at what they do as well to contextualize (Aouragh, 2018). This research for instance focuses on the dynamics of social media users that participate in online communities dealing with Balkan memes, politics, education, or popular culture.

### **2.3. First Contacts on the Platform**

To conduct my research, I reached out to the moderator team of the Subreddit over Discord so that they could help me promote my research on the Subreddit. My approach was straightforward: use Reddit's Discord server, and contact moderators on there to get permission to research their community and to see how they would recommend I go about finding interlocutors. My first contact was a moderator named Salt, little did I know at the time, but Salt is the current owner of r/Balkans\_irl. After a brief introduction of who I am and what my research is about, Salt told me that if I made

a post explaining my research and asking for interviews from people, that he would “pin” the post for a few days. “Pinning” the post ensured that it would be visible in the front page for others to see, without it getting lost among the other posts created after it. Ultimately, I sent Salt a copy of the post and uploaded it to the Subreddit. After thanking Salt for his help and once more confirming our upcoming interview and getting the contact of Hekuri - the previous owner of both r/2B4Y and r/Balkans\_irl - I began to get private messages from individuals looking to be interviewed; one comment however made me insecure in with the nature of my research. One unflared user that I can only assume is Croatian responded by commenting,

“Nico, Nico, Nico, I speak for former federation of imperialist czar and Trotsky supporters living in the National Socialist state of Croatia. All we say is no soup for you, and shitposting is nothing more than empty Bulgarian n\*t s\*ck without academic context. Message without flair to follow in the coming months.”

This reply caught me off guard initially, particularly where the user comments that ‘shitposting’ is empty, and does not have any type of academic context. ‘Shitposting’ is the online practice of creating deliberately provocative or ironic content and uploading it to social media just to stir the pot. This comment, by highlighting that ‘shitposting’ had no academic context was informing me that I should not try to read into the humor of the subreddit too much. This of course made me a bit insecure about my research, since if this was the case what exactly was I trying to figure out about this content. However, these worries were put to rest when people began reaching out in private messages or commenting that they were willing to participate. Regardless of the nature of the comments under the post, people’s responses were coated with nationalistic rhetoric. One user by the name of ‘HappyRomanianBanana’ commented, “you are a brave individual to be here and expect non-racist answers.” Many of the jokes directly at

my expense were never ambiguous, however. In one comment thread under my post, certain users with Turkish flairs joked about sending Bayraktar drones to my house and how I will never graduate, I responded with some self-deprecation and stated that I did not need their help or their drones to do so (as I had to prolong the writing of this thesis), as a response to this the original commenter stated *“You are a threat to the existence of the Turkish Republic (on a serious note I hope you graduate one day inşallah.)”* These exchanges were comical and provided me with some preliminary interactions prior to my interviews. It was a good way to begin the search for interviewees as well, which led to users eventually snowballing me in the direction of other users. The final aspect I would like to cover about my research announcement post that really surprised me was the number of comments of users stating that they were planning to do the same type of research. Around four users I had spoken to indicated that they had either done research previously or were interested in doing so in the future, this gave me hope that my research did in fact have an academic context that could be explored.

#### **2.4. Interlocutor Overview**

This section aims to give an overview of who I spoke with and contextualize who different people are. Once interlocutors had gotten in contact with me on Reddit or Discord we had some preliminary small talk, afterward we would discuss what my research consists of and how Reddit fits in this research. Then I would inform them that the interview would be audio recorded for transcription purposes and would not be distributed. If they consented to an interview but declined for it to be audio recorded, we simply had a written interview over discord, where the text would serve as a transcript. Not many individuals backed out of interviews entirely, some simply never appeared for the interview and others turned out to be minors, which led to the exclusion of their interviews from the data samples. The interviews themselves were



semi-structured, using guiding questions about my interlocutor's background and their views of the Subreddit. However, much of the voice call interviews were just conversational, it allowed for a broader conversational range from the interlocutors while allowing me the chance to ask specific questions. The written interviews were formatted similarly, but I asked more direct questions. The dilemma I had with the written interview was keeping the attention of my interlocutors, who at times would disappear for a few hours before returning to my question.

Fourteen interlocutors were found for this research, of these fourteen only ten were interviewed. Within these ten, four were part of the r/Balkans\_irl moderation team and only two are general content creators that produce Balkan and internet culture videos on YouTube. It should be noted that this paper will continue to refer to interlocutors by their usernames on Reddit and Discord, this is done to maintain their anonymity. The first individuals I would like to introduce are Salt and Hekuri. Hekuri was the original owner of the r/2B4Y Subreddit, and he created and instituted reforms on r/Balkans\_irl to avoid being banned again. He recently handed ownership to his friend Salt, who now runs the Subreddit. Both are Greek, except for Hekuri who is also half Albanian. Salt studies in the Netherlands and Hekuri over the next months will be joining him here. Another member of the moderation team is LordYançar, a Turkish mod that joined in 2021 in the last months of r/2B4Y. The final member of the moderation team I interviewed is Ibis\_Wolfie, a Greek-Australian neurodivergent and genderqueer user that got involved during the r/2B4Y days and does certain animation work for the Subreddit. The two content creators that are not involved with Subreddit are BalkanOdyssey and GhostGum. BalkanOdyssey is a Bosnian creator that immigrated to Germany, he uploads videos to YouTube on a variety of topics relating to Balkan politics, society, and culture. GhostGum is a Canadian content creator that released a mini documentary on r/2B4Y a few years ago, which had inspired the research for this thesis.

Furthermore, with Ghostgum being a Westerner interested in these Balkan internet dynamics brings in a perspective that is likely similar to mine as an outsider looking at this Subreddit. Other users I spoke to are MiskoSkace, a Slovene University Student. Grindo who is a second-generation migrant in the Netherlands with Greek roots. LordOfFailure576 who is Croatian and had much of his family directly involved in the Yugoslav Wars of the 90s. Hleba4Na4aiki (Bulgarian) and Chanka (Bosnian) are University students in their respective countries. The relations between the countries these users are from are complex and historically fraught: Greece and Albania have tense relations due to historical territorial disputes and issues with ethnic minorities in each other's countries. Turkey and Greece have longstanding historical disputes, particularly over territorial and political disputes in the Aegean Sea. Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia live in the aftermath of the scarring Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, which was marked by ethnic tensions, genocides, and mass displacements within the Western Balkans. Bulgaria, North Macedonia, and Greece also suffer from strained relations over historical and cultural disputes. However, these tensions cannot be generalized as attitudes held by a majority of citizens of any one country. This is something my interlocutors do throughout our discussions, they explain how these tensions and perceptions of the Other is something they agree with or not and the kinds of nuances they see when discussing other Balkan peoples.

### **3. Online 'Fieldwork'**

This section looks at Balkan political discourse in online contexts, and how this discourse changes because of social platforms. The choice of Reddit, and the Subreddit r/Balkans\_irl (Balkans in real life) was made because of how the platform predisposes users to engage. Unlike Instagram or YouTube where users follow a specific user for specific content, Reddit allows for people to follow specific topics where users contribute to content creation and engagement. With around 127,000 followers on

Reddit (top 2% on site by size as stated by Reddit), r/Balkans\_irl is one of the most frequented pages for Balkan memes along with other communities across different sites. This section will delve into the analysis of my research into Balkan political discourse online. Before delving into this analysis, however, it's important to understand what "Balkan internet culture" is and the context behind the founding of r/Balkans\_irl.

When it comes to internet memes according to my interviewees, one of the many popular and cross referenced niches of humor is Balkan humor, seen across platforms on different meme pages. There is no one standard definition for the memes that stem from this culture, but to some of my interlocutors what defined Balkan memes were the material culture in these memes that made them relatable. Things like food, music, TV programs, festivities were the focus point of such memes. Whilst others, valued socio-political memes whose content dealt with geopolitics, ethnic conflict, and history of the Balkans. These memes come in the form of image macros, captioned pictures, videos, text posts and other multimodal media regarding the countries and the people of the Balkans. These memes are created by users and shared on different online platforms with the purpose of mocking, joking, and bantering about other Balkan countries. The historical and cultural complexity of the Balkans makes for a great variety of memes and attracts many Balkaners and non-Balkaners alike. However, the phenomenon of Balkan internet culture is not just a new internet trend.

The earliest Balkan meme found online is from a June 14th, 2005 blog post on the French social media site "Skyrock." The meme (*figure.4*) jokes about how the United States really is just the United States of Albania. The humor here is the claim that despite the USA very clearly having no origin or linkages to Albania is ultimately (ironically or unironically) believed by this user to be Albanian. This analysis stems from a meme that emerged when users discussed George Washington's Albanian heritage on

his mother's side of the family. Another meme revolves around how Albania at one point in history owned the whole world yet was gracious enough to give land to all the

other countries in the world.



Figure 4

What makes this humor appealing is the over-the-top nationalism depicted in them, although it is very difficult to gauge whether an individual online holds these views

seriously or ironically. Some content can be perceived by users as over-the-top

nationalistic, as seen in *figure.1*. Despite it being posted in 2005 if

we look at *figure 5* which was posted in 2024, the very same theme of over-the-top nationalism is present, it portrays

the EU and other neighboring regions as being Albanian. These comments and memes found throughout the internet were compiled by various internet users, nurturing communities that create and consume Balkan memes. Two of the largest communities

on Reddit’s records before the founding of r/Balkans\_irl were called r/BalkanPeopleInternet (henceforth, r/BPI), and r/2Balkan4You (henceforth, r/2B4Y), these Subreddits were banned off the platform after the content on these Subreddits found to be inappropriate according to Reddit’s terms of service (ToS). During the interviews I conducted, it was clear to me that it was no question that the memes on the now banned subreddit were offensive. Two comments drew my attention: the first one is by user \_Peric\_, who in response to another user asking if banning the sub was necessary explained that, *“absolutely not. It was a Balkan version of r/ArabFunny and r/YoungPeopleYoutube. They just made fun of the Balkan nationalists by ironically acting like them.”* The second comment from another user called Yoooooode answers similarly. *“Nope it was a sarcastic funny sub where people from the Balkans said funny nationalist sh\*t, but apparently Reddit found it hate speech and necessary to remove it.”* This indicates that early on in the history of these online Balkan humor forums users were posting nationalist memes, and there has always been a debate surrounding

whether these memes were “ironic” or not. Users acknowledge the offensive nature of the content on the Subreddit but feel like the irony of the content went over the admin’s heads. In a conversation between redditors discussing the ban of r/2B4Y a little over a year ago. User BalkanTrekie comments, *“tbh (to be honest), the majority of expressed “humor” was ethnically based*

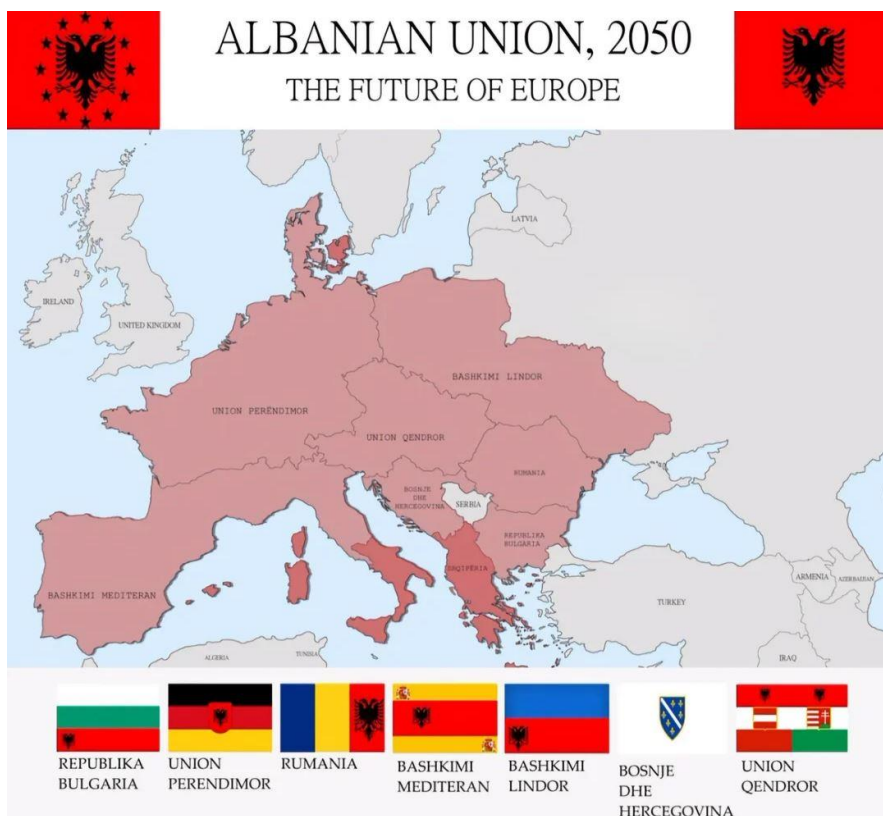


Figure 5

hate. Which I'm all for freedom of expression on sites like this but let's not pretend that it was the pinnacle of laughter." To which user Keitarofujiwara responds,

*"The point of 2B4Y was exactly the comical exaggeration of 'ethnic hate'. There was no more hate in 2B4Y than in any other subreddit. 2B4Y simply bothered a certain group of individuals who either didn't get it or were simply full of hate themselves. We all know what happened. Let's not pretend here."*

This exaggerated focus on ethnicity on the Subreddit is also perpetuated in other ways, there is a list of user flairs that function as user identifiers. In my experience with "flaring up" as it is said online, I had to choose an ethnic label that would accompany my username, a list of which is found in *figure set 1* to give some ideas.



Figure set 1

These flairs emphasize certain stereotypes from various ethnic groups and allow for users to know where users identify with. One of the moderators from the Subreddit, LordYançar, contextualized these flairs during our interview, *“the flairs were to identify Balkan nationalities there were kinda insulting flairs, but it was put to mock Balkan nationalists who used those on internet and it was funny not gonna lie.”* How you identify with these flairs can determine how others react and discuss things with you, which is why instead of identifying as a “Westoid” I chose “Cartel Leader”, since I’m originally from Venezuela and it was the closest one that identified South/Central America. This choice was also done to engage with interlocutors from a position that did not associate me with the West too much, as I did not want the ‘Westoid’ moniker to potentially influence how people spoke with me despite stating that the research was for a ‘Western’ University. The reasoning stems from Tarabusi’s (2020) article wherein Western researchers are stigmatized, and not taken seriously by local communities.

After the Subreddits were banned, users got together under a new Subreddit titled r/Balkans\_irl. The moderation team of the new Subreddit had also worked on r/2B4Y, given the fact that they had dealt with Reddit’s admins and lost a Subreddit, they had to make sure that this time there would be no reason for this Subreddit to get banned. Throughout my research, I spoke to a variety of users from the Subreddit; but I also had the privilege of speaking to current and past owners and moderators (mods) of the previously banned Subreddit. Over the course of my research, I spoke to 14 users of r/Balkans\_irl. Of these 14, five operate as mods with the Subreddit, three users that had volunteered were turned down for interviews due to them being minors, and one had ultimately backed out of an official interview after discussing this topic with them a few times off the record.

### 3.1. Purpose of the Subreddit

The beginning of my conversations with interlocutors always revolved around their personal use and perception of the sub. Most users, moderator and non-moderators, told me that the purpose was to have ironic offensive humor that was relatable to the stereotypes Balkan folks grew up with. When I asked regular users like Chanka, Grindo, Ibis\_Wolfie, and Hleba4Na4aiki what drew them to engage on the Subreddit, they would mention that they were just there for the content and finding a sense of cultural belonging. One answer in particular that interested me was LordOfFailure576, who said *"I'm only on the Subreddit for the culture and (political) history memes, I don't particularly care for the ones about our food and music..."* When he mentioned this, it was interesting that within the memes there was a preference between those that involved political and ethnic topics and those that dealt with material culture from the Balkans; of course there are themes in memes, but the significance is that the preferred memes tend to revolve around political and ethnic themes. When I asked him why he preferred these types of memes, he responded with, *"What can I say, deep seeded historical resentment makes for funny memes."* Another use was brought up by MiskoSkace, when he said, *"I'm from Slovenia, and it was mostly because Slovenia is part of the Balkans and I wanted to communicate with people from this area."* This theme of connection with Balkan peoples was across interviews with Hleba4Na4aiki, who said *"r/Balkans does bring people from the least friendly neighborhood in Europe together. Diaspora populations outside of Balkans engage with their countries of origin; many younger generations involve themselves online."* This points to a broader desire for a connection with people from the wider region and those abroad in Diasporas, which implies that there are possibilities within these groups for a supra-national identification that is less focused on individual ethnic groups and more so on the broader shared traits that these Balkan countries have.



Ibis\_Wolfie, who is also part of the moderation team for the Subreddit also explained that her reason for joining the Subreddit as a user at first was that *“what really interested me in this sub is being able to learn more about this region, being [part of] balkan diaspora it’s great to be able to find so many people who relate to this feeling and experiences.”* This effect of cultural belonging through relatable content was substantiated by other users like Grindo. In my interview with him I asked how he, as a child of first generation Greek migrants to the Netherlands, felt connected to this Balkan culture on the Subreddit, he explained that, *“before joining the Subreddit, I did not consider myself to be Greek, I barely speak Greek... After joining the Subreddit, I started identifying the memes with phrases and behaviors of my father.”* Nationalism, food, culture, these categories that were outlined by other interlocutors, instilled a sense of Greek pride for Grindo and relatability for other Balkan users. This contrasts with users like Ibis\_Wolfie, MiskoSkace, and Hleba4Na4aiki, who joined the subreddit to partake in the more general Balkan/Diasporic identity. In this situation, users like Grindo discover and identify with a national identity they already have direct or indirect linkages to. Grindo further explained that he feels like *“a fish in water, because I understand the water...”* He emphasized how influential his father’s views were early on in his life, *“as a kid, I followed my father’s lead and was very nationalistic, with age though I realized that I did not relate to Greek culture. So I accepted my Dutchness...”* This was until he explored r/Balkans\_irl, *“memes on Balknas\_irl gave me a space to reconnect with this culture, and it has reinforced my Greek pride...”* As many as there are memes, poking fun at Greeks and Greek culture, there is an equal amount of “Greek supremacy” memes. What was interesting from this discussion was when Grindo explained that the nationalism he felt was still rooted in much of the rhetoric and beliefs he learned from his father, but with the subreddit he would realize how cringe some of his father’s unironic nationalist takes would be.

Thus far, I had established through my interview that the purpose of the subreddit for some users was cultural relatability and socializing with other Balkan peoples, and for others it was a way of discovering their “national pride.” The use of ambiguously ironic nationalist stereotypes along with Balkan material culture on the Subreddit clearly pulls people into the r/Balkans\_irl community. As much as people are aware of the ironic nature of the humor, there had to be users that unironically identified with some of the stereotypes and perceptions of others. Grindo is an example of how unironic nationalism can be attracted to the subreddit, but my interview with LordOfFailure576 is one example of how unironic nationalists participate and engage on the Subreddit. At the start of the interview, he very clearly told me that he was a self proclaimed nationalist. Throughout our conversation he explained various historical figures in Croatia’s socio-political lore, for instance the glorification of generals like Ante Gotovina who was indicted for war crimes and crimes against humanity in 2001, only to be found guilty in 2011 after five years of hiding in the Canary Islands (ICTY IT-06-90, 2012). When I asked him why the ICTY went after Croat generals, he explained that,

*“what happened with Gotovina was a Serbian political stunt... After Operation Storm Serbs claimed that he over-shelled the city of Knin ( and that SOME civilian houses were hit... Only problem with this is that the City of Vukovar alone was relentlessly shelled without stopping for 2 months straight with the Hospital being especially targeted.”*

In 2012, Gotovina and other Croat generals had their convictions overturned, and were acquitted of the crimes they had been indicted and found guilty of, LordOfFailure explains that,

*“When he was acquitted, everyone in Croatia celebrated it and we had a big welcome party for him and general Markač (other indicted general that was with him.) We see Gotovina as a hero who did his duty Serbs will of fucking course lie about him endlessly and call him fascist or whatever, but he is good guy”*

This post-war mythology is an important cultural phenomenon in the post-war Yugoslav states (Dyrstad 2012, 828-829). Part of the EU's conditions for the accession of Croatia (prior to entering the EU last year) and Serbia was the country's willingness to cooperate with the ICTY investigations into war crimes by all parties in the Yugoslav conflict (Human Rights Watch, 2004); given the war hero status of many military commanders at the end of the war, it was difficult for those very governments to surrender them to the ICTY. Various examples were given about events that historically are misunderstood, or how alleged war criminals are just war heroes, the depth of discussion did keep us on the voice call for around three hours after all; and everything was very informative. At one point I had asked him how he would characterize his beliefs to an audience that wouldn't understand the appeal of unironic nationalism, to which he said.

*“Alright, so I am fine with being characterized as an unironic nationalist, but I have boundaries... I don't celebrate or take pride in the dark chapters of our history like the massacres of Serbs... I simply believe we are distinct from other peoples; I believe history has proven beyond a reasonable doubt that teaming up with our eastern neighbors ends in disaster, and that it is ideal that we would have good relation with them but that's not possible until they reconcile...”*

This outright rejection of a broader supra-national identity shared in this case between Croats, Serbs, and Bosniaks exemplifies how historical grievances and tensions between

countries in the Balkans serve as barriers. Despite acknowledging that Croatia has committed historical atrocities, it is still up to the neighbors to apologize. These nationalist sentiments, when embedded in memes for the Subreddit are often exaggerated, and taken to an ironic extreme where it is sometimes clear the intent is just a bad joke. Figure 4 serves as an example, the original text by user Cheeto insults Serbs by stating that he would rather drown than live as a Serb whilst emphasizing his pride of being a Slovene. This can be taken as a joke because of the exaggerated use of emojis along with the fact that the joke of killing oneself over being a certain ethnicity is a typical joke in the Subreddit. User AlexTheNMacedonian then accuses the Slovene user (jokingly) of getting the “bag” or getting paid by Albania to insult Serbia. The joke here is the Albanians (who have a lot of ongoing issues with Serbs) pay Slovenes (who peacefully left Yugoslavia and never fought the Serbs directly).

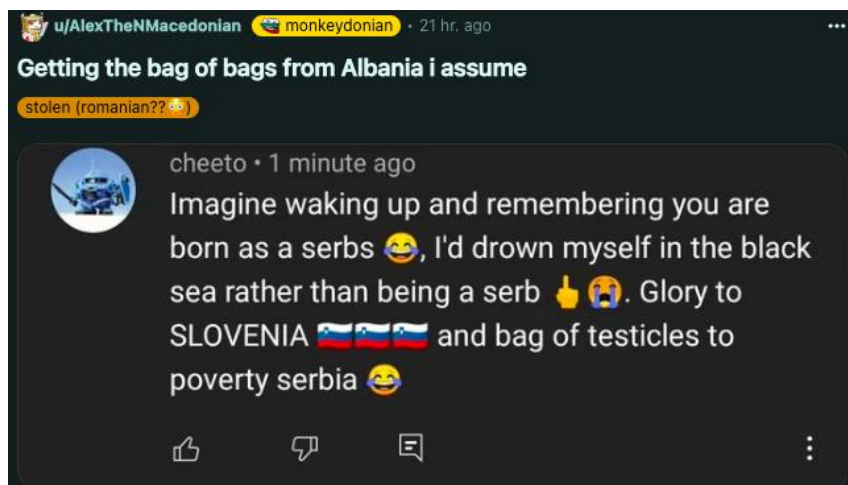


Figure 6

Overall, as far as my interlocutors discussed with me, users of the Subreddit acknowledge the offensive content on the platform, if anything they argue that this nationalistic content is created and interpreted ironically by most users, albeit not by

all. What brings them to the platform is the common culture of the Balkans, which includes certain unsavory types of content that Western audiences find offensive. Not all the content tends to be offensive, there is content that uses national pride but in the contexts of music and food as well. It offers those from diasporas to

reconnect with their culture online, and opportunities to speak with other nationalities from the same region.

### **3.2. Nationalism as a Means, Not an End...**

From the various discussions I had with my interlocutors, it was clear that this relatable Balkan culture of nationalism is what appeals to Balkan users and also attracts non-Balkan audiences. What I had to investigate further in my interviews was that these users engaged nationalist stereotypes and perceptions of other Balkaners on the Subreddit. After spending time in Bosnia and on the Subreddit, I understood that these stereotypes and perceptions of the 'other' were pretty acidic in political discourse. The war is still very much in people's memories, and the traumatizing legacy it has left behind haunts people's personal histories but also their politics. This legacy is in people's minds, and also in their everyday spaces. These visual and physical reminders of the war, such as the Sarajevo Roses and other wreckages from the war serve as daily reminders of what was and what could be; after all, the people I had met in Bosnia never seemed confident in the Dayton Agreement, and the ethnic strife among the three Constituent Peoples has not been reconciled. The online discussions with my interlocutors over why they go on the Subreddit and what they enjoy about it revealed that the nationalist references and ethnic stereotypes is what attracts users, both Balkan and non-Balkan alike. Once this was established in the interviews, the point of inquiry was where exactly these stereotypes and nationalist perspectives came from; since they are clearly present online and offline. Some interlocutors had already indirectly started discussing this, for instance Grindo discussing his father's nationalist influence on him as a kid or LordOfFailure576 explaining the tragedies committed onto his family. This section seeks to further understand the origins of the tropes and ideas that constitute these nationalist ideas and the stereotypes that stem from it.

One aspect discussed with BalkanOdyssey that was brought up by interlocutors as well is the role of media and politicians in projecting stereotypes whilst reinforcing national pride. One example comes from Chanka gave of a small village in his canton called Bihać, where yearly commemorations of the war are televised (as they are in many places of the non-Serb parts of the country). He mentions that, *“what you hear is always the same, that we suffered a lot and that we must remember what was done to us by the Serbs, that we had some of the best military officers, the bravest troops, all of that hype for our military all on TV.”* During my time in Sarajevo, national holidays like the first of March (independence day for Federation), or January ninth (Sprksa independence day) were broadcasted across the country, with both commemorations causing tensions across the country. Many in the Balkans have faced conflict in recent history and the use of people’s personal connection to the war perpetuates resentment and prejudice which reinforces animosity. BalkanOdyssey mentions that the most warped perception of the “other” comes from personal experiences during the war,

*“I feel like personal connection to the war is the one that most influences how Balkan people view each other, if someone killed someone in your family, you may be the most hardcore pro Yugoslavia Partisan, you will have to fight the Yugoslav army to protect your family ... and these feelings are passed down to their kids”*

The proliferation of these stereotypes and ethnonationalist rhetoric as a process is an outcome of the offline world and how people are involved in these perceptions of the Other from very early on in their lives. In turn however, the online proliferation of these stereotypes has worked to challenge and reinforce these notions. These mechanisms perpetuate animosity between Balkan people, and is where stereotypes of the “other” are first cemented in public discourse. These stereotypes in turn are internalized as a part of Balkan identities by depicting the “other” as violent, backwards,

or lesser than the group you identify with. There are generational differences, as Hleba4Na4aiki stated, *“Younger generations fail to be convinced of political narratives, there are bigger issues for us like the lack of opportunities in our communities or the risk of future violence.”* The memes that come from these perceptions of the “other” are instilled in the current Subreddit and those that precede it, which is also the reason these groups have been consequently banned (except for r/B\_irl). The reason there is a challenging of these notions is through the user’s ironic employment of these stereotypes to highlight and make fun of how “crazy” (as some of the interlocutors put it...) these views were, creating an inside joke for those on the Subreddit that can be offensive to those not “in” on the joke. My discussions with the ex-owner Hekuri and current owner Salt were very different from the rest when I asked them about their purpose on the Subreddit. The question had thrown him off a bit, since as he explained, *“as a user, I enjoy the memes and the sense of community. However, as the ex-owner I would say that our (including Salt) expectation is that through ironic nationalism people realize how “silly” these stereotypes are, and how they work to keep people divided...”* When I asked why this was the purpose they wanted the Subreddit to have, Salt interjected with, *“Our goal as a subreddit is not just to reinforce Balkan unity but create that unity, a sense of broader Balkan pride instead of just the Balkan specific countries...”* What I asked after was *“but how do you achieve this without also attracting the unironic nationalists?”* Salt answered,

*“It may strengthen the unironic nationalists, and reinforce the ‘great man history’ of individual countries. But everyone gets mocked, and everyone gets praise... We can mock each other’s countries because we all have issues... Many of the memes have self-deprecating humor along the lines of stereotypes: our current countries suck, we know it, it’s not a hidden thing... Making them (memes and stereotypes) less taboo in the eyes of users makes things less sensitive to discuss.”*

Hekuri added on those banning previous iterations of the Subreddit does more harm than good,

*“when there is content that is outright racist or calls for the death of any group it is taken care of by the mods and taken down, but the biggest punishment comes from the community that will see if content is outright dangerous and unfunny... But that is the beauty, users can see those people and call them out... The bans of previous Subreddits were done to deal with Western sensitivities. Nico... we cooperated with the admins every step of the way when they had issues, but ultimately instead of understanding the culture behind the Subreddit they just shut us down.”*

Salt added to this that *“stereotypes come from observations people make, the stereotypes won’t go away just because you ban r/2B4Y.”* We discussed the nature of these stereotypes, and I asked them where these are internalized by Balkan peoples. Hekuri mentioned nature, and nurture, *“Before the internet when I was young, these stereotypes of others were shaped by news media and whatever my school said.”* Hekuri explained that there is a sense of superiority people have towards others,

*“we think ‘oh yes we are Greek we invented philosophy and democracy, we have to hate Turks because of what they have done to us a million years ago’ or in the case of my mother ‘oh she’s Albanian married to a Greek guy, and even though she has a university degree don’t give her proper work because of how lazy Albanians are...’ the way we view the ‘other’ is very much created when we are younger.”*

When having this discussion with Hekuri and Salt, it appeared that the perception of the ‘other’ and the stereotypes imbued in those perceptions is very closely linked to the



identities that they fostered at an early age, like Grindo's case; where his father's nationalism and attitudes were adopted by him without any particular understanding of what these beliefs meant... *"All I knew is that my father did not want me to forget where I am really from (despite also being half Dutch). It was important for him to make me a proud Greek, even if it was at the expense of Turks, Albanians, Northern Macedonians."* When BalkanOdyssey and I discussed this connection between projected stereotypes and the sense of identity that came with it, he assured me that there was a very systematic way that these beliefs are instilled and reinforced throughout the lives of Balkaners. The components that contribute to this development of identity and stereotypes according to BalkanOdyssey comprise other components that other interlocutors brought up, the first one that we delved into was family. *"The way that family influence can be determined is by the family's political positions, whether they are reactionaries, progressives, or new-age Westoids..."* (BalkanOdyssey, 2024). When I asked him to elaborate on these categories, he explained that, *"reactionaries are those that live with the war and its consequences in their minds constantly, the loss and trauma from the war keeps them antagonistic towards the 'other' and highly loyal to the Government you identify with."*

This definition reminded me of LordOfFailure576, who explained the cost his family suffered not just during the war in the 1990s but also how these losses translate into his nationalism and sense of Croat superiority. It is much harder to expect cooperation among groups like Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats on issues like common development due to the animosity that remains after the Yugoslav Wars. Progressives as he explains are nationalists that are not as concerned with the war, but are more concerned about their own groups within the established political status quo. *"These people are more politically engaged, and trust the political system to function better for their group if they were to reduce the influence of other groups over it..."* (BalkanOdyssey, 2024). The

supposed “new-age Westoids” are categorized by their full belief in the EU, and aim to distance themselves from nationalist politics. *“That seems like the best category to be raised under when it comes to indoctrinating nationalism, but in reality new-age Westoids have the sensitivities and negative perception of the Balkans, which doesn’t allow room for the type of humor on the Subreddit.”*

### **3.3. Allegory of the (Balkan) Cave**

*“You know, you live your whole life inside the cave and then you go out of the cave and see a new world. I saw memes about Greeks, Albanians, many others from the Balkans... I could read what Turks said of Greeks and they could see what we say... I want them to learn about their neighbors, and get them out of that cave.”* (Hekuri, 2023)

This reflection by Hekuri in one of our last conversations embodies the mission that r/B\_IRL sets out to achieve. The common culture of hyper-nationalism and its connection to individual identities has amplified the atmosphere of ethnic tensions across the region. *“Stereotypes serve as ways to focus criticism on an external group rather than focus on domestic politics: ‘passing the buck’... The expectation is that through ironic nationalism people realize how ‘silly’ these stereotypes are, and how they work to keep people divided.”* The use of flairs for instance helps users identify with something that is sometimes used in derogatory ways, allowing them to reclaim them through humor since everyone has flairs highlighting ethnic stereotypes. When discussing the engagement of Western audiences with these memes despite not understanding the background of these stereotypes, BalkanOdyssey stated that

*“Western audiences superficially engage with these memes joking about mental illness, racism, genocides. This is used as a coping mechanism for Balkan people. These memes*

*help us see how chaotically dumb conflicts are between us in the Balkans, we come to accept this common point as a part of being 'Balkan.'"*

Ultimately, the reconciliatory impact that owners like Salt and Hekuri wish for the Subreddit to have is:

*"a cross cultural pollination that engages people of supposedly belligerent cultures. For Balkaners to discuss, joke around, debate, and create a perception of the "other" that is unfiltered by media or politicians." (Salt, 2024). Hekuri added that, "Talking with people of other countries that my country hates really helps understand them more. Talking to Turks as a Greek helped me see Turkey how it is and not just how it is portrayed in the media here."*

The Subreddit offers users a space where they can engage, offend, and learn from each other; even if it's through content that is deemed offensive and harmful. As BalkanOdyssey also stated, *"There is potential for us to understand ourselves through satire and humor helps ease the nerves and take things less seriously."* This statement contrasts with Chanka, who was telling me about how taboo it was to discuss certain historical topics *"we had some Turkish exchange students at my school, during history courses surrounding the Ottoman occupation of Bosnia our professors would avoid going into too much detail at times or would skip certain topics."* The opportunity to discuss with others from the Balkans allows for a recalibrating of perceptions, granting people access to Balkan culture in a way that is inaccessible offline. In our last interview, ex-owner Hekuri told me, *"I wanted it to become a political ideology of Balkan unity, I want them to learn about their neighbors, and get them out of that cave..."* With the banning of these communities, this approach has had to be re-evaluated, although interlocutors are frustrated that their perspectives are ignored by Western administrators like the

ones that threatened to, and banned previous iterations of Balkan Internet Subreddits. This is despite the enjoyment of the Subreddit by the active participation and engagement by Western users- as can be stated by the amount of users with “Westoid” flares -Western cultural sensitivities from outside the subreddit towards topics dealing with dark or offensive humor tend to frown upon this content. Chanka explained it so,

*“The problem with the EU and the Balkan is that the EU has a bit of a hate ‘b\*ner’ for the Balkans. They blame us for WWI and WWII, we were complete animals, then we started wars killing each other in the 90s, we were socialist states, we were but were not in NATO... and generally from what I have seen, Europe thinks very little of the Balkans...”*

When I asked him what he thought of Westerners living and working in the Balkans, he told me,

*“We had a few Portuguese people, some Germans, a few French people, and one English man; I don’t know how but okay... and all of them said the same thing: ‘Oh you know, Bosnia is so nice, good food, good people, cheap prices, beautiful nature... but really its much nicer in Spain, things are nicer in Southern France... Bonia is nice but X or Y is nicer.’ They basically say it in a condescending way. When I ask them ‘why did you come here?’ They all say the same thing... ‘oh you know I’m a humanitarian, I love helping people lalala...’ they came to us as volunteers while at the same time they have an EU salary that is 3x what we make here and prices are half what they would pay at home...so it's obvious why they are here but they are still going to hide that fact...”*

This type of attitude towards foreigners is very reminiscent of Tarabusi’s (2020) analysis on the attitudes Balkaners had towards Western researchers in the Balkans: that Western researchers among other foreign researchers believe they know better

than Balkan peoples what their region needs. This came up in a discussion with BalkanOdyssey where he characterizes this as a type of Orientalism the West has towards the Balkans, *“issues that the EU and the US have attempted to fix such as different country’s borders in the Balkans are issues that have in some instances been going on for centuries... they think shoving money in our countries and moralizing about how we need to do better will fix anything...”* (BalkanOdyssey, 2024). This perceived “superiority complex” the West has towards the Balkans was massively felt when the previous Subreddits were banned, with current owner Salt explaining, *“I can understand how hateful and offensive it can be taken, but we don’t actually believe it. We ridicule people for holding those (nationalist) beliefs for real. When an Ustaše (Croat nationalist) or Chetnik (Serb nationalist) see how un-seriously we take their beliefs they become confused.”*

The at times insular mentality that is cultivated in the Balkans by offline ethnonationalism at school, through the media, and in politics has made it difficult for people such as my interlocutors to discuss and question their historical identity openly. This makes it more difficult to break through these stereotypes and perceptions of the Other in the offline world. However, through the Subreddit thanks to the internet, people from not only the Balkans, but other countries are able to learn, share, and interact with these ethnonationalist identities more freely. This has been taken by the moderation team and the leaders of the Subreddit to use this space to encourage the destigmatization of the Other through memes and ironic humor on the platform. Albeit, as has been noted in other interviews, users also participate in this Subreddit to perpetuate and engage unironically with such content. This has led to discussions and content on previous iterations of Subreddit that have gotten them banned off the platform entirely. The metaphor of the Allegory of the Cave that Hekuri refers to is interesting in this context. Just as the cave dwellers in Plato's allegory are exposed to

the light of the outside world, the hopes are that the subreddit could serve as a space for Balkan users to engage with each other, challenging and changing deeply embedded perceptions through personal connection and humor. This transition from darkness to light, from ignorance to understanding, underscores the transformative potential of the subreddit. Therefore, it is understandable that with the few options to challenge and destigmatize in the offline world, the silencing of these groups can be frustrating to users.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Identity in the Balkans was, has been, and will continue to be a negotiated exercise. The fault lines between groups in the region go far back in history; many feuds prevail over issues like territory, cultural ownership of historical/cultural figures and sites, and resentments over past violence such as the 1995 war for the ex-Yugoslav states. The way identity has been politically weaponized by political and cultural actors has created tensions with how people engage with their own identity and how it impacts their everyday perceptions; and with the advent of the internet many online cultures like r/Balkans\_IRL engage with these identities. This thesis sought to explore these tensions, and how they are negotiated by asking: *How do people articulate and negotiate with their national identity on Reddit, and what does this say about identity in the Balkans?* Through digital anthropology methods, I engaged with user content on the platform and reached out to several users through private messages and snowball sampling, and I also posted an invitation for users to reach to me if they would be interested in discussing the Subreddit.

What was gathered from these interlocutors was that users on r/Balkans\_irl are nominally trying to overcome the segmented, ethnic stereotypes and divisions they argue are cultivated at a young age and reinforced into their respective national cultural

and sociopolitical discourse in the Balkans. They do this by accentuating and highlighting these stereotypes through content like memes, which draws in Balkan people that understand the references and foreigners interested in them. The Subreddit itself offers a community composed of Balkan people from the various war diasporas, Balkan expats, Balkan people, and foreigners. These users are attracted find the Subreddit to a space of cultural relatability, sticking to themes of Balkan history, pop culture, music, food, among other types of cultural material. Other users appreciate the Subreddit as a space where they can socialize with fellow Balkan netizens, whilst others discover and explore their nationalism on it. The at time ironic nature of this content however goes over the head of those that do not frequent the Subreddit and is overlooked by those that are unironically there for it. All users I spoke with acknowledge the edgy nationalist content on the Subreddit and its offensive nature, however there are those that see this as an opportunity to challenge those very same ethnonationalist stereotypes by exaggerating them through humor to highlight how, as one user said, “silly” these notions are. The way the users I spoke with articulate their national identity on the Subreddit by using self-deprecating humor that highlights the misconstrued stereotypes about their own country or background. This is done through flairs, or by posting content that exhibits an overly exaggerated sense of national pride. The way this leads to a negotiation of the user’s identity is that it offers users the choice to reinforce or challenge certain notions of identity that are perpetuated in the Balkans and the communities around the world that stem from there.

The data sets analyzed to come to these conclusions have strengths and limitations. The strengths can be attributed to the small sample size and the online nature of the research, whilst the limitations are that the conclusions derived from the data sets cannot be generalized to a broader analysis. The small sample size kept the data gathering simple, this can be argued to be a weakness, however because of the online

nature of the research, interactions and conversations with interlocutors could be done whenever and for as long as we wanted. Some ways future research could be conducted to overcome the limitations in this research would be to organize much larger interlocutor samples to account for a wider population. This along with broader media analysis of the content produced on the Subreddit (memes, videos, discussions) could lead to more detailed insights on the themes and the ecosystem that make up the space users engage in. Finally, this research could be extended to other social media platforms, to see if the results align with those of Reddit or how they differ.

All in all, certain users engage with the Subreddit to explore and discover their Balkan identity and others use it a way to laugh at established identities and seek to adapt these identities as they see fit, cutting what they dislike and appropriating what they identify with. Ultimately what this indicates about identity in the Balkans is the struggle to overcome the prevalent ethnonationalist discourse that has permeated through the region since the end of the Cold War and throughout the Yugoslav Wars. However, the internet has opened up an opportunity through online forums for Balkan netizens and others to engage in this Balkan content and try to engage with, including by challenging these deep-rooted ethnonationalist sentiments in ways that could not have been done before because of the constant intermingling the internet provides.



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