

The Concept and Boundaries of South Eastern Europe and the Balkans

The terms "South Eastern Europe" and "the Balkans" are often used as synonyms in international political, historical and geographical works. However, the two concepts are only similar up to a certain point. The peninsula in South Eastern Europe was first named *the Balkans* in 1808 by A. Zeune, a German geographer. Until then it had been known as the European part of Turkey, or the Greek (Hellenic), Byzantian or Illyric Peninsula. Similarly to the Iberian (Pyrenean) and the Italian (Apennines) peninsula, the area was named after its most important mountain range, the Balkan Mountains in Bulgaria (Stara Planina in Bulgarian). The northern boundary of the Balkans has been heavily debated. It is usually considered to be the natural border marked by the Danube, Sava and Kupa rivers (Figure 1). It is highly problematic to

draw the north western boundary of the Balkans in the region now part of Slovenia and Croatia. According to Ricchieri (1917) this boundary stretches along the line of the river Sava, the cities of Ljubljana and Gorizia (Dainelli 1922), while J. Cvijić (1922) held that the boundary was marked by the rivers Sava and Soča (Isonzo). Challenging the view that the northern boundary of the area was demarcated by the rivers, Th. Fischer, a German geographer, introduced the concept of South Eastern Europe (the South Eastern European peninsula) in 1893, later on claimed to encompass territories north of the rivers mentioned above, and often the whole Carpathian region (historical Hungary and the two Romanian principalities) (Mauil 1937). Today, for political, geographical, historical and cultural reasons, South Eastern Europe is usu-



ally held to comprise of the successor states of former Yugoslavia – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, FYR Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia – and Albania, Bulgaria and Romania. Greece, located at the southern part of the peninsula, is considered to be part of the Mediterranean region and Southern Europe, alongside being regarded as the cradle of European civilisation and stronghold of Western Europe in the Balkans in the second half of the 20th century, in addition to being a member of the EU and NATO. During its period of communist rule, Hungary was also considered to be part of this area, mainly for political reasons, as the country was separated from the “German” part of Central Europe by the Iron Curtain. Both concepts – the larger South Eastern Europe and the more narrowly defined Balkans region – refer to an area of Europe in which progress came to a standstill in the 15th century, becoming part of the Ottoman Empire for 400–500 years. Owing to its geographical features, the peninsula being open to the north, east and south

east, was regarded as a typical transitory area; a bridge between the western and central parts of Europe and the Middle East. The term “the Balkans” was ascribed with a dubious meaning and negative connotations during the wars of liberation fought in the 19th century by the small nations of the area, being overwhelmingly of Orthodox Christian faith. It is since this period that the division of a region into numerous small states, and its destabilisation by ethnic rivalries has become known as “Balkanisation.” Besides Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia object vehemently to being referred to as “Balkan” (or South East European), on account of their historical and cultural traditions, higher level of economic development and geographical (Central European) location. Likewise, it is also questionable whether to label Voivodina in northern Serbia and Transylvania in Romania as “Balkan”, since historically, culturally and geographically, these territories may be regarded as the south eastern frontier region of Central Europe.