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Master’s Thesis

Balkanism in Action: Self-perception(s) and Political Culture among Youth in Serbia

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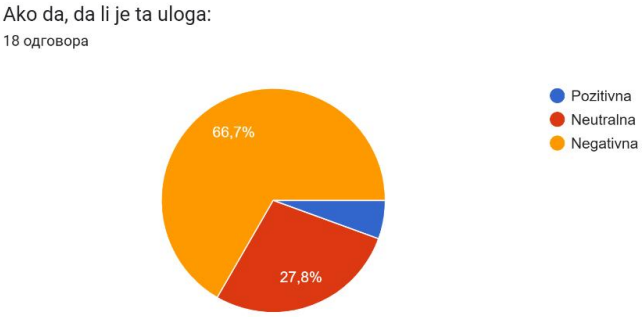
List of Abbreviations, Tables, and Figures

Graph 1.1.

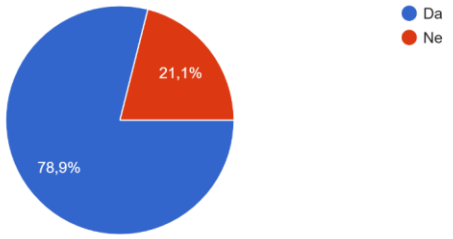


Graph 1.2.

Graph 1.3

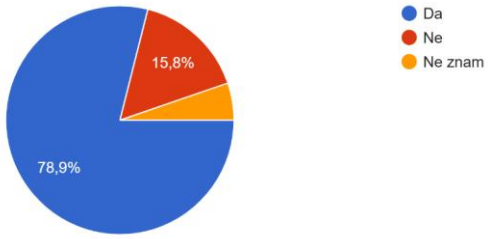
Graph 1.4

Da li društvene nauke kreiraju, ili doprinose kreiranju određenih percepcija o Balkanu?
19 одговора



Graph 1.5

Da li mislite da postoji "srpski mentalitet"?
19 одговора



Graph 2.1

Graph 3.1

Graph 3.2

Preface, Acknowledgements

Writing this thesis was challenging in its own way – trying to write and participate in a protest was not always easily done. However, it is done, and I am grateful to everyone who played a part in writing this thesis. I owe a big thank you to my Mentor, my colleagues, friends, and students who participated in the research.

Dedicated to all “the students who do not want to study.”

Contents

Abstract

Balkanism is one of the most famous and contentious concepts in Balkan studies, drawing inspiration from Orientalism. It is a term coined by a historian, used to describe historical events and the behavior of political and other actors in the Balkans and Europe. Placing Serbia under the framework of colonial studies and its critiques is a paradox because Serbia was not a colony in the classical sense. However, in Serbia, it is evident that there is an internalized logic of colonialism – one in which some have histories and evolve, while others have a mentality and are incapable of change. In Serbia, the people have a dual self-perception about themselves, at the same time, Serbs see themselves as “Heavenly people” and “The worst ones”, which we simplified using the term *mentality.* We asked the students at the Faculty of Political Science whether they believe that people in Serbia have a mentality and, if so, whether it is politically relevant. To answer the research question, we opted to combine Constructivism, Postcolonial theory, and the Theory of Political Culture for the theoretical framework. The methodology used to collect data employed a mixed-methods approach, involving both surveys and focus groups. The research results indicate that students do believe in the Serbian mentality and find it to be politically relevant. This research contributes to Balkan studies, as well as to studies of Constructivism and political behavior, opening the space to further research on how Balkanism is internalized and influences political behavior.

Key words: *Balkanism, Serbia, mentality, political culture, students.*

Introduction

My interest in writing this thesis is both personal and academic. Personal experiences during my studies at the Faculty of Political Science, combined with life experiences from living in various rural and urban areas of my country, and the region, have sparked an interest in learning more about myself and my people. Moreover, I wanted to see whether we have, and if not, why we have not learned from our history. I also wanted to understand how it is so easy for our people to dismiss events by simply saying, "It is what it is," and "There is nothing to be done about it, it is just how we are." As a student of Political Science, I was taught to observe institutions, norms, regulations, interests, and behaviors, and try to provide explanations. Not just any explanation, but one based on science and methods. During my studies, we dedicated many lessons to understanding how states, institutions, and leaders make decisions, and why. On the contrary, we spent much less time observing how groups and individuals collectively respond to that, how they approach decision-making processes, and what motivates and influences them. This thesis is my attempt to examine how individuals in one group (or nation) perceive themselves and the politics around them. I research whether the Balkanist discourse influences perceptions of Serbia and self-perceptions, and if so, how these perceptions reflect on Serbia's political culture. Therefore, my motivation to research the topic of Balkanism and political culture in my thesis is both political and sociological.

When I first moved to Belgrade to start my studies, I encountered an interesting observation about myself from a fellow student. Because of where I am from, he called me the "exotic species". I do not joke. I was born and raised in Kosovo and Metohija, and because of that, to him, I was a pureblooded Serb. An example of what "Serbhood" stands for. At first, I dismissed what he said as irrelevant and just a clumsy attempt at flirting, perhaps. I told myself that he was probably joking. There is no way that someone can be perceived as a "higher being" just based on the geographical location of their birthplace or the circumstances of that place. It turns out I was wrong. People are perceived and self-perceived quite a lot based on where they are from. We call those perceptions prejudices or stereotypes. Sometimes we believe them to be an accurate representation of that person; sometimes we engage more profoundly with them to unravel whether that prejudice holds ground or not; sometimes we dismiss it, and do not think about it. However, these beliefs influence our behavior and shape our perceptions more than we are aware.

Growing up in the Balkans, you are taught early that the world is not fair, and that injustices happen more often than you would like them to. If you come from an ex-Yugoslav country, then you, early on, also learn that everybody is against you. That everybody, really is everybody, from your first neighbor to the bordering country, and almost an entire so-called

international community. Additionally, if you come from Serbia, you will also learn about the great Serbian nation, with a centuries-long history, a libertarian spirit, remarkable endurance, the concept of "Serbian inat" (stubbornness), and a particular inclination towards a victimhood mentality. Since the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, these narratives have intersected in our history and political struggles. The myth of the Battle of Kosovo created Serbian identity (Bakić-Hejden 2006, Djokić 2009, Greenawalt 2001). It is a myth about choosing internal glory and the kingdom of heaven over earthly victories and pleasures. It is a myth about bravery and treason, a story about choosing between right and wrong, choosing to suffer and accept suffering as a norm. The Kosovo myth is a covenant made between Serbs and God. It was used to reclaim the sovereignty of the Serbian people over their lands on numerous occasions throughout history; it was also employed to shape various narratives about the Serbian people and to liberate or capture them in certain beliefs and behaviors. From here stems our presumption of one of the established (self) perceptions of Serbs as a "Heavenly people" that we are questioning in this thesis.

On the other hand, since the breakup of Yugoslavia, Serbia, one of its constituent Republics, has not been able to stabilize its political or economic arena for a longer period. Sanctions, wars, NATO aggression, failed transition from a state-planned economy to a market-oriented one, Kosovo's one-sided declaration of independence, a long road to the European Union, and politicians who hold power over the country for more than thirty years – prospects of the country seem to have not changed for the better. Alternatively, at least they are perceived so. Personally, whenever I asked people what could be changed and how, more or less, the answer was similar: nothing can be changed, and no one can change anything. We are stuck. And the reason is that we are just "that kind of people," meaning the worst there is, and we deserve everything that has happened to us, both good and bad. Completely opposite self-perception from the one described above! People here also tend to say that we are a very forgetful nation and have forgotten about the many wrongdoings of others. That we always turn the other cheek and let those 'lesser' of us humiliate us.

Over the last decade, people have been protesting magnificently against a corrupt system, ecological disasters, and mining. On the local level, people are organizing and acting on political issues. There is also a great sense of national pride whenever Serbian athletes achieve excellent results in international competitions. Just some of the most popular and widely shared tweets sum up this pride – "If I were not Serb, I would kill myself!" and "We did not ask to be the Heavenly people, but I really do not know who would perform that function better than us!" We also often say that we have a great sense of humor, which comes from our great suffering as a nation. If we cannot do anything, then at least we can joke about it so much that it hurts. Since the Students' Movement arose, people have had more compassion and empathy for their neighbors, and they have again a shared sense of community and solidarity. Now, they believe in change.

Summarizing these traits, we refer to this as the mentality of the people. I wonder how this combination is possible. How can one nation have diametrically opposite perceptions about

itself? Furthermore, I wonder how these self-perceptions reflect people's views on politics and their political behavior. If we genuinely believe we are the worst, and we do not hold power to change anything, but are heavenly people, then what is our view on life? Are we just passive recipients of decisions made for us by someone else, or are we so experienced and patient that we know how to wait for the right moment to act? What do we actually believe about ourselves? Since the Students' Movement rekindled the spark of "Serbia's greatness," the research question I pose in the thesis is whether students in Serbia believe in the existence of a "Serbian mentality" and if it is politically relevant today. Students have consistently represented the most educated and progressive force throughout history; whenever they raised their voices on an issue, it soon became a social movement demanding systemic and social change. The year 1968 will be remembered as the year in which students all over the globe protested for peace and justice. It is not different today in Serbia, where students are at the forefront of the movement demanding justice for 16 victims killed by the fall of the railway station canopy on November 1st, 2024. According to the research conducted by CRTA, People look up to them, follow them, and trust them ("Ciljna Populacija Punoletni Građani Republike Srbije (Bez KiM)" 2025). This is one of the reasons why they are the focus of this research. Narrowing the research to students of political science does not place them as more important than other students who are involved in the movement, nor is the involvement criterion for the research focus; it is simply that, because of the resources and general blockades of the universities in Serbia, the author had the most access to the students at the Faculty of Political Science.

The reason I connected this to the study of Balkanism is the connotation of the region with certain, and mostly negative, stereotypes, and the tendency to view it as a homogeneous region from outside, on one hand; and on the other, tendency to see the Balkan region as a particular area, with traits that are nowhere else to be found but here (like certain levels of corruption, or specific culture) coming from within the region. There is undoubtedly some duality and paradox in the Balkans. The term Balkanism originated in postcolonial theory, even though the Balkans were not a colony in the same sense as the African, Asian, or South American continents. The region was subjugated by two Great Empires – the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman, which have left their legacy, but was never colonized. Yet, some traces of coloniality can be found in the region – that is how the term Balkanism emerged in the first place. These traces can be labeled as "logic of coloniality" as well as a struggle for domination over the region by different European powers. In sum, the logic of coloniality employed during the colonization era presupposes that some people (mainly colonizers) have histories and advance through time, while others (the colonized) have mentalities (essential traits that do not change throughout history) and are therefore unable to progress and achieve greatness. Additionally, the need to dominate the region gave birth to specific narratives employed to describe and address the region.

The study of Balkanism explores narratives of domination from outside and inside the region. Maria Todorova sees Balkanism as a discourse creating a Balkan stereotype inspired by

Edward Said's Orientalism (Todorova 1997). Unlike Orientalism, which is Europe's "Other' outside, Balkanism is Europe's "Other" from within, representing Europe's "incomplete self.' While Orientalism stems from colonialism, Balkanism is an internal political construct. Both are dialectical, rooted in power and domination, with external influences shaping perceptions and responses from the region itself, creating a dialectical relationship. The Balkans mirror Europe. A key difference is Balkanism's focus on internal differences, termed 'Nesting Orientalism' by Milica Bakic Hayden, where Balkan peoples differentiate themselves through perceived superiority based on culture and geography. Katarina Luketic's study (2013) situates Balkanism in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, showing it can help heal regional traumas. By naming my thesis "Balkanism in Action," I aim to analyze how these perceptions developed, their link to Serbian political culture, and what lessons can be learned. Legacy also significantly shapes Balkanism, marked by intersections of diverse legacies in the region. In Serbia, these include the South Slavic arrival in the 7th century, Christianity, the Byzantine Empire, and the Nemanjic dynasty, crucial for Serbian identity and Orthodox Christianity. The Serbian Empire's brief existence, overshadowed by the Battle of Kosovo and the Kosovo myth, is often overlooked. Ottoman rule lasted five centuries but varied regionally, reinforcing regional differences aligned with Balkanist and Orientalist narratives. The 19th century witnessed the emergence of Balkan liberation and modern nation-states, while the 20th century was marked by wars, Balkanist discourse, and the rise of communism, all of which shaped regional narratives. Post-communism and Yugoslavia's dissolution sparked new narratives of 'returning to Europe.'

This thesis is structured to explore the mechanisms and concepts described in the introduction. In the literature review, we examine what Balkanism is, its similarities to and differences from Orientalism, and the authorities on the topic. We aim to identify the gap in existing literature and establish a foundation for a theoretical framework that underpins the thesis. The theoretical framework builds on the Constructivist paradigm, Postcolonial theory, and the theory of Political culture. In this chapter, we also introduce the concepts of Colonial discourse and Balkanist discourse. The following chapter is dedicated to the methodological approach. We opted for mixed-methods and Discourse and narrative analysis. Through surveys and focus groups, we examine the processes and discourses that follow, which are created, introduced, and reinforced through various mechanisms. In this thesis, we focus on these mechanisms and their influence on perceptions and political behavior to determine which of them remain relevant and which have been overlooked today. Following the methodological part is the empirical analysis and discussion, in which we present the results from surveys and focus groups, and argue about the kind of influence Balkanism has on political culture in Serbia.

Literature Review

The Balkans are the mountainous peninsula between the Adriatic and Black Seas. The Balkan Peninsula is situated in the southeastern part of the European continent; geographically speaking, its borders are easily defined. For a very long time, the peninsula did not bear the name it bears today. Etymologically, the word "Balkan" is of Turkish origin; however, before it became popular as the name for the Balkans, it originally referred to the Haemus Peninsula, also known as the Peninsula of Haemus, which has ancient Greek origins. During Ottoman times, the area of the peninsula that was under its rule was known as Rumelia. When the Ottoman Empire ceased to exist, many states emerged from it, and the term “balkanisation” was used to describe that event. To “balkanise” meant dividing into small and mutually hostile groups. The term has a negative connotation and was so popular that it was even used in the decolonization era in Africa as something the leaders of the decolonization movement wanted to avoid happening to the African continent (Neurberger 1976). It is safe to say that the Balkans are not defined solely by their geographical position, but by a combination of political, historical, cultural, religious, ethnic, and economic categories and criteria (Todorova 1999, 50-68). The literature review is structured into three thematic areas – the first deals with the various legacies that can be found in the Balkan region and its imagined borders. The second area delves in-depth into the debate about the positions of Balkanism and Orientalism, and the third focuses specifically on Serbia's position within the context of Balkanism.

The Land of Many Legacies

The Balkan borders are more symbolic than actual and are shifting, regardless of the peninsula’s concrete position on the European continent. “On the imaginary map, 'the Balkans' figures as an *enclave*” (Močnik 2002, 101), something that is isolated, surrounded by progress, but cannot progress itself because of its specificity. There is no universally agreed-upon definition of what the Balkans are or where they are located; a significant portion of the Balkan region is still identified with the geographical location of former Yugoslavia (Platnak & Paleviq 2022). Many scholars conceive of the Balkans not as a “product of geography” but as a “place in discourse-geography” (Mishkova 2018). When the era of colonization began, while Europe’s major powers held most of the known world, a significant part of the Balkan Peninsula was under the rule of *another,* non-Western Great Power – the Ottoman Empire. This part of the continent was also known as European Turkey. While the colonization period started in the 15th century, its peak was in the 18th century, and it coincided with the Age of Reason, i.e., the Enlightenment era, which had an immersive impact on cultural and political perceptions, and (imaginary) mapping and ‘inventing’ of the ‘unknown world.’

During the Enlightenment period, European intellectuals and philosophers based in Western Europe invented the concept of Eastern Europe (Wolff 1994). Simultaneously, they invented Western Europe as a complementary concept. Eastern and Western Europe are defined by opposition, with Western Europe being perceived as civilized and progressive, while Eastern Europe is often viewed as barbaric and backward. Larry Wolff describes the invention of Eastern Europe as a process of demi-Orientalization (ibid., p. 8) because, like Orientalism, the imagination and invention of Eastern Europe are an intellectual mastery embedded in domination and subordination. Philosophical geography played a part in the invention of Eastern Europe. Cartography had helped illuminate the 'dark corners' of Europe and the world. The cartographers had the political and cultural power to mark the independent and civilized land and distinguish it from the 'unknown' lands simply by coloring. Philosophers of the Enlightenment, such as Rousseau and Voltaire, demonstrated that without travelling to 'unknown lands' of Europe, philosophers can explore them simply by imagination (ibid., pp. 90-95). As such, Eastern Europe was being entered, possessed, imagined, mapped, addressed, and peopled by political geography, cultural cartography, and shifting of the borders during wartime periods in Europe.[1]

The colonization era, Orientalism, and the image of the Other are closely connected. Processes of colonization, 'Orientalization', and imagining and inventing Others were happening simultaneously. Creating stereotypes was crucial for the era of colonization. Therefore, the explorers of the "new world" were not only exploring it but also bore with them culture and God's will (Jezernik 2007). The shift in scientific methodology during the Enlightenment, specifically the empirical method used to challenge stereotypes, became a proper mirror image of colonizers (ibid). The after-effect of the Enlightenment in the whole of southeastern Europe is the uncertainty and instability upon which the invention of the region was happening. It constructed the region as a cultural entity through binary oppositions (Wolff 1994, 356-376). Inventing and imagining 'Others' is a part of broader orientalist discourse. For example, Ronald B. Inden in *Imagining India* (2000) criticizes the set of knowledge of 'Others' that Europeans produced since the Age of Reason. The Indological branch is just one of the orientalist discourses, in which India is referred to in metaphors, like 'female', 'dream', 'jungle', or 'sponge.' Inden, too, accents the fact that between "Euro-American Selves and Indian Others" there is a dialectical constitution (Inden 2000, 3). The Ottoman rule of southeastern Europe had a similar impact on the Balkans as it did on Eastern Europe. As the Ottomans were considered Oriental, it made it easier to subjugate the Balkan region under orientalist discourse once they withdrew from that land. Once, a century later, when communism was 'out of the picture' as well, the Balkans remained the European 'Other'.

When observing the Balkans from an "objective" point of view, one can see that, in the past, rural communities of the region shared a lot of standard features. The lives of ordinary people in Serbia, Albania, or Bulgaria are not that different even today. The reason for these

[1] The verbs and descriptions used here are in the titles of Chapters of Larry Wolff's book *Inventing Eastern*: *The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*. 1994. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

similarities can be found in the fact that "the entire region shares a common macro-social frame which originated in the Byzantine and Ottoman legacies" (Kiossev 2002, 169). The influence of these legacies is a topic that chaperons debate in Balkan politics, economy, culture, identity, and everyday life, as well as Balkanism, centuries after those Empires ceased to exist (Kiossev 2002; Todorova 1999, 2012; Bakić-Hayden 2002, 2006). The Balkans are a place where Christianity separated into two parts, they are a borderline between Western and Eastern Roman Empire, and a place where Eastern (Orthodox) Christianity stood "in defense" of its Western counterpart when the Ottomans conquered Byzantine civilization.

Many diverse civilizations have been present in the Balkan region, often overlapping and influencing one another. Between the many civilizations present in the Balkans, either developed there or imported, distinctions can be made regarding the level of influence they had on the region and its population. Jovan Cvijić (one of the founders of Balkan studies) argues that those "civilizations existing prior to the establishment of the Yugo-Slavs (South Slavs) and the Turks have not influenced the bulk of the present population" (Cvijić 1918, 470). Cvijić recognizes the influence of the Byzantine Empire. However, he argues that it was stronger in Bulgaria than it was in Serbia, even though it can be traced and seen in the Medieval art and literature of the Serbs. Besides Turkish and Oriental influences, Western European influence and the influence of the Balkan-rooted patriarchal regime, specific to Serbian and Albanian-populated areas, are also present in the Balkans (ibid., pp. 479-482). Cvijić does not recognize Balkanism as originating in the Orient. Instead, he insists that the "Byzantine civilization [is] …Balkan civilization par excellence, Balkanism in the true sense of the word" (ibid., p.472). "[Jovan] Cvijić saw the historical development of the Balkan peoples and the region as a whole as being marked by discontinuities and assimilations between different clusters of cultures" (Mishkova 2018, 51). The flow of these many civilizations had an impact on "mental traits of the population," and the lack of continuity in the region is one of the specificities of the Balkans (Cvijić 1918, 471-2). These "discontinuities and assimilations" make the Balkan region so complex, and its nations interconnected, and more like each other than not. Still, like many heterogeneous similarities, the Balkans can be found to have many heterogeneous differences (Kiossev 2006, 171). One of the most "Byzantine" traits that can still be observed today, marking the Balkan region as such, is ambivalence (Bakić-Hayden 2002). This ambivalence highlights the relationship between Orthodox Christianity and the Byzantine state, known as symphony, in which both the head of the Church and the head of the state held equal positions in their respective areas. Bakić-Hayden proposes that perhaps it is the Byzantine legacy of ambivalence – interpreting reality as essentially ambiguous – is the key to understanding both Europe and the Balkans, as well as their complex relationship.

In *Inventing Ruritania* (1998), Vesna Goldsworthy demonstrates the representation of the Balkans through European eyes. Her book is an analysis of popular fiction and novels mainly written by British writers. Ruritania as such is an invention of Anthony Hope's writing in which he describes an imaginary land, full of political intrigues, which has inspired many other works

and movie adaptations. Whether it is an imaginary Ruritania, the land of Kravonia, or the Orient Express train, all depictions of the Balkans place it as a land that represents European "Other". An interesting observation is that the British consider the entire European continent as the "Other". At the same time, the Balkans are just the most extreme example of that "otherness." The British writers from the 19th and 20th centuries are the ones who have produced the most literary works about the Balkans that have inspired many more that came afterwards. These works also have the most influence on the perceptions of the Balkans on the 'outside'. In popular literature, the Balkans are portrayed as the stage where European neuroses and desires are played out; they are the powder keg from which emerge the conflicts, crises, and wars that can only be averted by the British heroes of the stories (ibid., pp. 70-73). The metaphor of the Balkans as a powder keg helps place culpability on Balkan states for the perpetual crises, rather than portraying the peninsula as a victim of Great Powers' rivalries, and instead portraying it as a perpetrator and a threat to the outside world (Goldsworthy 2002, 25-28).

The Balkan region, in contrast to the lands of Eastern Europe, remained largely unexplored in terms of territory, but its stories were rich. Vesna Goldsworthy suggests that this kind of invention of a region is a process of imaginative, contextual colonization. Goldsworthy argues that the Balkans are a colonized region, and as such represent a mirror image of the Western power (Goldsworthy 1998). Therefore, the Balkans are used for employing the neo-colonial narrative that is no longer imaginable in other parts of the world, mainly those that were under Imperial rule. Writing about Albanians, Bulgarians, Croats, or Serbs as untrustworthy, manipulative, dishonest, brutal, or savage is allowed here. The paradox here is that the Balkans were never a colony of any Great Power, unlike regions and people in Africa, Asia, or Latin America. Nevertheless, the Balkans were (and still are to some extent) under the narrative colonization of Great Powers.

Is it Orientalism or Balkanism?

Academic debate about the position of Balkanism and its relationship with Orientalism is ongoing. Authors such as Milica Bakić-Hayden, Maria Todorova, and Vesna Goldsworthy have established Balkanism as a critical study of colonial representations, distinct from Orientalism. These authors began to represent the Balkans as a place in "discourse-geography" (Bjelić 2002, 4). Katherine E. Fleming argues that the Balkans do not fall under the Saidian concept of Orientalism, nor does Balkanism, as a discourse, rest on earlier academic traditions of Balkanism, because there is no single Balkanist tradition (Fleming, 2000). Fleming insists that the institutional organization of the two (Orientalism and Balkanism) is different. While knowledge about Orientalism has a long tradition of "expertise", Balkanism originally consisted of travelogues, journals, and some history books. "Expert" knowledge about Balkanism was introduced only when Yugoslavia broke apart. The most important difference is that Orientalism originated in the Western centers of knowledge, while Balkanisms "are an intellectual export industry of the Balkans" (Bjelić 2002, 7). As well, Diana Mishkova demonstrates that the "esthetization" of the Balkans comes both from within and outside the region and is present in

"academic, artistic, intellectual, even political hypostases" (Mishkova 2018, 121), which contributes to the academic presence of the Balkanists discourse before institutionalization of the Balkan studies.

In *Imaginarni Balkan*[2] (1999), Maria Todorova coined the term 'Balkanism' to describe the relationship between the Balkans and the rest of Europe, as well as to distinguish discourses about the Balkans from Orientalism. According to Todorova, Balkanism is "more than an Orientalist variation" (p.23), it is a "discourse on imputed ambiguity" or an incomplete Self (p.40). Diana Mishkova describes Balkanism as a discourse that posits an ontological and epistemological distinction between the European "Self" and Balkan "Other". Diana Mishkova's book *Beyond Balkanism – The Scholarly Politics of Region Making* (2018*)* provides an in-depth overview of Balkanists' perspective from the region itself. Both works named here highlight the fact that Balkanism is dialectical, discursive, and relational. Maria Todorova provides a critique of Balkanization and Balkanism while simultaneously attempting to answer the question of how negative self-perceptions that Balkan people have about themselves become accepted and internalized, given that they are coming from outside. She opposes equating Orientalism and Balkanism, while acknowledging that they share some overlapping elements. Todorova agrees that both Orientalism and Balkanism are discursive formations, with the main difference between them being the metaphorical and symbolic nature of the Orient, as opposed to the concrete and somewhat defining nature of the Balkans (Todorova, 1999, 2010). Todorova argues that the significant differences between Balkanism and Orientalism are the geographical and historical concreteness of the Balkans; the fact that the attitudes towards the Balkans were mainly explicit and negative, while the Orient held the epithets of exotic and mysterious land and people; while Balkan is the European border-land with the East, Orient is the complete opposite of the West; and Orientalism is a discourse of imputed opposition, while Balkanism is a discourse of incomplete self (Todorova 1999, 8-40).

Connotations about the Balkans revolve around a similar matrix; they are stories of violence, exotic yet rigorous people, and strong traditions. In the travelogue *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (2007), Dame Rebecca West admits that violence was all she knew about the Balkans and the South Slavs (West 2007). West made it "her task to uncover and praise the nobility and culture that contradicted this patronizing impression" (Hitchens in West 2007). The great empires of Europe have betrayed the Balkan people, especially the people of Serbia, as Dame Rebecca West feels, which is why some parts of her region analysis come off as biased. However, a critical appraisal of the Balkans reveals that her writing still contains a dialectic of Balkanism. She could not think about the peninsula only as "gentle and lamb-like" (ibid, p.21), nor as only rigid and violent, especially after the 1903 coup. Yet, she felt like she could understand and sympathize with its people. As Robert Kaplan in *Balkan Ghosts* (2005) explains, West was trying to create a historiography, charged with emotions, which often happens when one tries to explain or describe the Balkans. A notable point in Rebecca West's traveling journal

[2] Imagining the Balkans, 1997, Oxford

is the distinction the people of Yugoslavia made between themselves. Croats were different from Serbs; Serbs living in Croatia were different from those living in Serbia, and they are all distinct from Serbs and others who live in Old and South Serbia. These differences, attributed to confessional differences and different legacies left by former ruling empires, constitute an invisible border between the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires. This invisible border continues to divide the peninsula to this day, in all spheres of everyday culture (Kiossev 2002). During the dissolution of Yugoslavia, a specific manifestation of this border emerged, which is something that Milica Bakic-Hayden described as 'nesting Orientalism' or reproduction of Orientalism (Bakić-Hejden 2006).

Milica Bakic-Hayden sees Balkanism as a subspecies of Orientalism. Since the rhetoric of Orientalism builds on distinctions between west and east, and south and north, Orientalism also implies the logic of coloniality, with a schema of west and north being developed, modern and civilized, and east and south being primitive, stagnant, and savage (Bjelić 2002; Bakić-Hejden 2006). As an example of nesting Orientalism, Bakić-Hayden illustrates the case of the former Yugoslavia during its breakup as a state. The rhetoric and tactics employed by political leaders at the time represented such logic, where every side pointed to the other as something essentially different and 'uncivilized', or not European, democratic, and developed enough. The reasoning behind resorting to such logic lies with different legacies present in Yugoslavia, where northern parts of the country were under Austro-Hungarian rule, and had cultural (and political) differences with the southern parts that had Ottoman experience and legacies (West, Todorova, Bakić-Hayden, Kaplan…). Reproduction of Orientalism in the Balkan region can be traced further back to the period of the late Ottoman Empire, as Diana Mishkova points to the works of South-Slavic authors who have claimed racial superiority over non-Slavic inhabitants of the peninsula (Turks and Albanians) (Mishkova 2018, p.42).

Balkanism can be interpreted as an ideology, specifically, the Balkanist ideology that takes the function of maintaining a nationally organized society (Močnik 2002). In this sense, Balkanist ideology fills the knowledge void left in all post-communist societies. Rastko Močnik analyzes Balkanism as an ideology of domination that can shift through two, simultaneously opposing and complementing, dimensions – the dimension of cooperation in "Europe" and the dimension of antagonism in "the Balkans." Neither of these dimensions can be established or reproduced without the other. The Orientalist representation of the Balkans functions simultaneously in both dimensions: …in the international dimension, "this ideology defines the Balkans as a particular region with specific codes of behavior … [as well] … as a mechanism of domination within the Balkan countries themselves" (ibid., p.85-86). The reason this occurs is because of the set of belief-backgrounds that work simultaneously, which Močnik demonstrates in public speeches given by Croatian and Slovenian politicians who advocated for the dissolution of Yugoslavia (in which they were both stuck in, and separating themselves from the Balkans). The connection to Orientalism, in Močnik's interpretation lies in furthering Maria Todorova's argument. Močnik claims that Balkanism, as a mechanism is more radical than Orientalism.

While Orientalism stands for logic of domination imposed by colonial rule, Balkanism "is the immanent logic of self-constitution" that is unable to conceive itself except from the "point of view of dominating other" (p.95). The theory that Močnik implies here is not of "interiorization" of logic of coloniality among the Balkan people, rather Balkanism is a "para-logical device, which provides the horizon of a specific rationality" (ibid). To summarize, Balkanism is a hegemonic ideology, employed by Balkan people and Balkan countries. In this sense, hegemony is not a question of domination, but a question of survival, especially after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Balkanism is a pragmatic discourse device that enables shifting between belief backgrounds, in both dimensions of Balkanist ideology.

The final point in this review about the distinction between Balkanism and Orientalism is made by referring to Andrew Hammond (2006, 2007). Hammond points out that the governing, political, and power structures supported by Balkanist discourse are rarely explored; he also highlights the specificities of Balkanism, making a case for how it cannot be considered a subset of Orientalism. Andrew Hammond locates two periods of Balkanism: one in British' response to declining of the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century, and the other in the EU's eastern enlargement after 1989, making an argument that "these periods share a sense of Balkans as a borderland that requires Western supervision" (2006, p.8). The interference of Great Powers in the Balkans, in an attempt to resolve the Eastern Question, was an effort to prevent Russian expansion in the region. This was a time when 'balkanization' was coined to highlight the splitting of the empire (both Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman) by emerging national forces. That moment resembled the Great Powers' fear of losing control and territory, which is why the Berlin Congress disregarded the wishes of new nation-states in their struggle for independence, returning native populations to "colonial rule," and planting seeds for future national struggles (2006, pp. 9-10). "The stereotypes governed Western conceptualization of the Balkans in the nineteenth century remain today" (Hammond 2007). The process of EU integration and eastern enlargement following the fall of communism in Europe, as well as NATO-led interventions in the former Yugoslavia, exhibits a similar tendency towards control and interference. In it "its rhetoric of 'eastern expansion' and 'eastern enlargement' [the EU] began asserting itself like some nineteenth-century empire, and the notions of backwardness, (semi)savagery, poverty, dependency, violence and corruption in the region offered a vindication of foreign rule and interference (Hammond 2006, p.11, 13, 19). From Hammond's point of view, Balkanism is evident in political and governing structures, supported by (British) travelers' writings and reflected in the 'need for foreign rule' over the region.

Andrew Hammond argues that cross-cultural discourse interaction with a particular region eventually gains a certain uniqueness that can feature a distinctive tradition of that discourse (Hammond 2007). The author distinguishes Balkanism from Orientalism by expanding on Todorova's discursive imagery and questioning Todorova's notion that the Balkans have never been romanticized. Again, the author points out that discourse that dominated the last decade of the twentieth century made South-East Europe (*the Balkans* – my cursive) one of the West's

"Other" by a "plethora of travel accounts, films, memoirs, and media articles" (ibid., pp. 201-2). The most significant difference between Orientalism and Balkanism lies in their positions within Western imaginative geography. "On the one hand, the Orient has always been viewed as an absolute point of otherness that exists outside the framework of Europe, threatening the continent from without […] while the Balkans have become the other within, a liminal self that undermines continental unity and stability by more subtle erosion" fixating Europe's superiority in the world, and at the same time creating a need for maintaining hierarchical culture structured in the continent (p. 204-6). The second distinction between the two discourses, Andrew Hammond finds in the specific gendering of the two regions. Namely, the feminization characteristic of colonial discourses, which was widespread across both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and regions of the world, evaded the Balkans (p. 207). The South-East Europe is portrayed as dominantly male, patriarchal and lacking grace (p.208). Contrary to Todorova's claim, Hammond argues that Balkan maleness is explored in a rather positive account (ibid.), which Bozidar Jezernik's study about perceptions of Montenegrin men as brave and heroic can, to some extent, support (Jezernik, 2007).

Serbia in the world of Balkanism

In international relations, perceptions are everything. The entire politics of detente (and, for that matter, the entire Cold War period) is based on (real or false) perception of threat, power, or friendship (Mearsheimer, 2007). During the 20th century, political discourse about Serbia and Serbs, as 'the Other' moved in two directions: completely negative or indifferent (except for a moment of appreciation of the Serbs during WWI). Like the importance of the perception in International Relations is great, the self-perceptions of one people (or nation in the modern sense) are critical for understanding the world and its position in it. Perceptions of the Balkan people were highly politicized and shifted as political currents changed (Mishkova 2018). At the beginning of the century, after the events of May 1903, when part of the Serbian military conspired to overthrow the ruling Obrenović dynasty and enthrone the Karađorđević dynasty, those perceptions were extremely negative. Because of the brutal manner in which the *coup d'état* occurred, the rest of the European monarchies were in shock. Some, like Great Britain, even severed diplomatic relations with the Kingdom of Serbia, claiming that such terrible murders are unfit for a European monarchy (Markovich 2022). When the Balkan wars occurred, the peninsula was scrutinized for a specific kind of brutality and savagery employed during the wars, which became a common perception of the region once the Ottomans were gone (Michail 2011). In the period after World War II, negative perceptions of Serbs were almost absent from the prevailing political and international discourses, which can be attributed to the specific Cold War setting and a submerging of Balkan studies. Some explain that this peaceful period happened thanks to communism, a lid for Balkan nationalists, and dominating forces (Hatzopoulus 2003, 13). The negative connotations about the Balkan re-emerged, greater than ever, during the Yugoslav civil war and the break-up of the state completing a cycle of 20th-century discourse on this part of the European continent, as violent and primitive (Todorova

1999) and as its 'Other' which is living in a different time and space form Europe (Kaplan 2005). The Yugoslav wars were wrongfully interpreted as 'Balkan wars', pointing to a tendency to look at this complex region as a homogeneous entity, devoid of all peculiarities.

Slobodan G. Markovich (2022) makes the argument that the perceptions of others (especially the perception of Orient) in the eyes of European writers, historiographers and scientists does not necessarily mean they are false. Rather, it is the knowledge (constructed during the Enlightenment period and era of colonialism) that only Western Europe, with its scientific and technological advancement, can produce knowledge based on rational inquiry and reality. Still, in this study, the author does not ask how the West became so advanced and got to the position of creating and reproducing such knowledge about others. S.G. Markovich further explains that the British perception of Serbia is an accumulation of knowledge made throughout the nineteenth century, that shifted from "(re)occidentalizing" Serbia to "(re)Orientalizing" it (depending on the political situation). In his words, occidentalizing Serbia began in the middle of the nineteenth century, it was abrupted with the May Coup in 1903, when the balkanization of Serbia started, only to be re-occidentalized once the diplomatic relations with the British were re-established (Markovich 2022, pp. 195-203). While he recognizes the process of Orientalization, Markovich opposes applying Orientalist discourse on the Balkans (because it overlooks historical facts for the sake of political arguments). He places Serbia as European, just not completely European, but as Europe's inferior self. Such positioning of Serbia deprives it of agency and its development, a colonial pattern (as well as a pattern of Orientalist discourse – a point with which Markovich agrees) and is part of what Balkanism represents. We can argue that different perceptions of the Balkans, whether they are truthful or not, have at least a psychological impact on the subject of perception. We can further argue that those perceptions and self-perceptions influence their everyday life and political behavior.

The practice of "orientalizing" Balkan countries, i.e., not fully accepting them as they are or making them into something else and modifying them according to hegemonic discourses, continued in the 21st century (Cufurovic 2017). The protagonist of that external modification can be located within the European Union, in the process known as "Europeanization." Zoran Milutinovic (2015) maintains that Europe exists as a "discursive construction; not as a fact, but as an interpretation" (p.256), and that all historical discourses have circulated in the Balkans. Europe sees itself and reproduces that image on others, as modernity and modernization, as a cultural empire and post-democracy, i.e., the discourse of promoting universal rights and values (this conceptualization emerged during the dissolution of Yugoslavia) (ibid., 2015). This analysis holds the argument of relationality between 'the Self' and 'the Other', as well as an insight into the self-perception of one subject. Interestingly, no such relationality was found within the Balkan conceptions of Europe. A large-scale survey conducted in 2011, by Pål Kolstø (2016) and his team, established that those living in the Western Balkan region share the same position as the European Union regarding who is and is not European. As demonstrated in the text above, the perception of the Other in the Balkan is dependent on geographical position,

cultural differences, and legacies left by different Empires. The European Union gradually became an equivalent for perceiving the European continent. Going to Europe meant going to the Western Europe, not only for post-communist countries but for tourists as well as politicians from around the world. Therefore, EU membership or non-membership is used as one of the criteria of what is or is not Balkan/European (ibid., 2016, p.1248). Self-identification in terms of postcolonial theory presupposes the existence of 'otherness', which is the case for both European and Balkan identities; only, the Balkan process of self-identification is, according to Marina Antic (2006), much more complex than European. In this instance, "the Balkan self is never separate from the European gaze and Europe is thus never absent from the Balkan self-identification" (ibid., p.154).

A specific problem that this thesis does not address in its research, but is conceptually aware of, and which demonstrates the presence of Balkanism and Balkanist discourse in the region and European politics towards it, is the process of Europeanization. It may be that the topic of Balkanism is now explored chiefly in this area. The process opposite of Europeanization is the process of "balkanization" (Lika 2023). The Balkan region is now associated with the term Western Balkans, coined in 1998 in Vienna, to mark countries of the peninsula that are not members of the European Union. Western Balkans now refers to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Initially, Croatia was also part of the group until it joined the EU in 2013. A similar critical analysis was employed in Croatia prior to its accession to the EU, which drew upon postcolonial concepts and the dynamics of center-periphery relations (Obad 2008). As Tanja Petrovic (2014) observes, "in political discourse the term Western Balkans has replaced the term Southeastern Europe" and we can only answer what Western Balkans is by inverting it, and asking what it is not, and that is Europe (2014, pp.4).

The process of Europeanization in the Balkans is the intersection of colonial patterns and Balkanism. Balkanist discourse, as Petrovic argues, promotes "colonial traits in the sphere of politics and the economy that exceed mere metaphorical usage of colonization discourse" (ibid., pp.8). "Western Balkans have always been considered Europe's periphery and in need of supervision, guidance and training by the West – the region has become an ideal arena for shaping a new European Orientalism" (Petrovic 2022, 112). If we observe the processes of liberal peacebuilding in the ex-Yugoslav region after the breakup of the state, we can identify the colonial patterns employed there, notably in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the establishment of the Office of the High Representative, and in the creation of the state of Kosovo. The most banal representation of the colonial pattern in Kosovo is Kosovo's flag and anthem, which are intentionally designed to resemble those of the European Union. A separate thesis can be written about the colonial administration and state-building in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. What we can extract from colonization discourse present in the Balkans that is significant for this thesis, a point Tanja Petrovic makes is that "societies that are subject of orientalisation may internalize, reinterpret and modify it for the purpose of their internal demarcations and

negotiation of their own identity" (ibid., pp.117). The point Petrovic makes aligns with the thesis's hypothesis that Balkanism in action, when applied to the context of Serbia, reflects the internalization of the logic of coloniality and influences the country's political culture.

One of the best-known fictional characters originating in southeastern Europe is Dracula, a vampire who emerged from the imagination of British literature. His descendants are the people of the Balkans, who, in the European colonial gaze, reflect its past as unenlightened and backward. The symbolic representations of Balkan people indicate Balkans' "otherness" in the eyes of Europe, and the mirror image of Europe's "Self". Tomislav Longinović's book *Vampires like us: writing down 'the serbs'* (2005) proves the mechanisms used to create the image of Serbs as vampiric, avatars of violence, especially after the Cold War ended. The symbolic representation of Serbs, whose "image produced in British popular culture at the end of the nineteenth century has traveled to the end of the twentieth to establish political discourses the US-led West sustains" to this day (Longinović, 2005, p.18). Longinović argues that Serbs are doubly Orientalized. The double Orientalization of Serbs comes from their affiliation with Orthodox Christianity (that, alongside communism, connects them to Russians, and makes them the new center of the US-led West's attention after the dissolution of the USSR, according to Longinović). The Serbs also "bear the post-colonial legacy of Ottoman servitude" that "transformed them into the Other Europe within Europe" (Longinović, 2002, p.49-50). Finally, the position of Serbs and Serbia in the context of Balkanism is a position of "the avatars of post-communist violence in the Balkans" after the disintegration of Yugoslavia, as Longinović claims (2005, p.7). There is a specific kind of victimization among Serbs, in which Serbs shift "between the slavish and imperial and see themselves as a small nation victimized by great powers and the greatest of Balkan nations" (ibid, p.22). The interplay between Byzantium, Orthodox, and Ottoman legacies, as well as the 1389 Kosovo Battle and Kosovo Covenant, the demise of the medieval state, the Serbian Uprising and Enlightenment, heroism and the liberation of people in the First World War, unification with South Slavs, integrations and disintegration of Yugoslavia, Communism, failed transition, the process of Europeanization, the separation of Kosovo – all these events make up for a rich history of Serbian people. Even more, they played the part in self-perceptions of Serbs as Heavenly people (Kosovo Covenant legacy) and Serbs as bad, underserving, victims and objects of history.

Conclusion / Research Gap

The purpose of this literature review was to scope the field and identify studies about Balkanism and locate a gap in existing literature. Since the 'birth' of the term 'Balkanisation' and the emergence of Balkan studies, the Balkans have been looked at, researched, and defined under political, cultural, and other norms set from the perception of 'being the other'. In this literature review, the research methodologies the authors used were not evaluated, mainly because the methods used are more or less similar: discourse and text analyses combined with rich historiography. The majority of existing studies on Balkanism have in common the ambivalent position of the Balkans as something that is 'neither here nor there', a borderland and a periphery

at the same time. Most of the research into the Balkans focuses on the (national) identities of its inhabitants, seemingly mutually excluding legacies, then on religion, imaginary geography, and mentality. When Yugoslavia violently dissolved, the region re-emerged as a research subject, along with its past baggage, so adjectives such as ancient hatred, violence, nationalism, and otherness became a common denominator for the studies of the region. The authorities on Balkanism agree that the term Balkan has a pejorative meaning, which came from the outside but was internalized from within the area. However, the main disagreement concerns whether Balkanism and Orientalism are similar, same, or completely different occurrences in academia and the world of politics and international relations. Many studies have examined the inventions and imaginations in politics, upholding the legacy of the Enlightenment period. This literature review presented some of the most influential ones. The perceptions and self-perceptions of Balkan people are also closely tied to the concept of Balkanism. While Bulgarian, Romanian, Greek, and ex-Yugoslav perceptions in general lead the way in these studies, relatively little attention has been given to how Balkanism has influenced those countries ' people's perceptions and political behaviors. The other overlooked concept in these studies is political culture, which is puzzling since general cultural differences play a big role in Balkan studies and many other post-modern approaches. There are not many recent studies that demonstrate the implications of Balkanism or attempt to connect it to the political culture of a particular people. Even David W. Montgomery's *Everyday life in the Balkans*, which by undoing stereotypical representations, offers "insight into how the people of the region construct their everyday life in terms of art, religion, history, and ethnic relations" (Montgomery 2018; Oriol 2019), does not explore how these people shape their political life and behavior under the stereotypes that stem from Balkanist discourse, except in chapter 4 which deals with general political discourses. The specific gap here refers to the Republic of Serbia, a central Balkan country, and its people, who have a dichotomous perception of themselves.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this thesis consists of Constructivism, Postcolonial theory, and the theory of Political Culture. These three approaches, combined, provide a nuanced framework for building research and exploring the nature of Balkanism's influence on self-perceptions and political culture in Serbia, and answer the research question of whether (political science) students believe in the existence of a Serbian mentality and whether it is politically relevant to them (does it influence their political choices/behavior). Constructivists in International Relations (IR) were popularized by Alexander Wendt (1992), and have made Constructivism an inescapable phenomenon in social and political science ever since (Zehfuss 2002, 2). Constructivism in IR occupies the middle ground between rationalist and interpretive approaches, asserting that "reality is socially constructed by cognitive structures that give meaning to the material world" (Adler 1997). This approach focuses on how material, subjective, and intersubjective worlds interact in the social construction of reality, explaining social

institutions and changes through the combined effects of agents and social structures (Wendt). Another theory we are applying here is Postcolonial theory, which can be categorized within the realm of interpretative theories. Postcolonial studies are a product of the poststructuralist turn, and as such, they are situated between theory and practice (Huggan 2013, 299). Poststructuralism emerged in the mid-twentieth century, in France, with thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault (some of the most well-known) who critiqued the notion of meaning and knowledge being fixed and stable and understood through structures and systems. Poststructuralists argue that meaning is constantly shifting, depending on power relations, context, language, and social constructs. This theoretical turn, and the thinkers who influenced it, have shaped the work of theorists of postcolonialism, such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak (2022, 2024), whose work is seminal for understanding the connective tissue between Constructivist and Postcolonial approaches. Finally, by introducing the Theory of political culture, we can further explore how shared beliefs, values, norms, and symbols shape political behavior and institutions within a society. When linked to Constructivism and Postcolonial theory, the theory of Political culture can explain how certain legacies have influenced the political culture in the society. For example, how historical experiences impact attitudes toward authority, democracy, and governance, and explore if, and how narratives of Balkanism have become embedded in the political culture, affecting policy choices, national identity, and are manifested in political practices, institutions, and discourses.

The structure of the theoretical framework is as follows: we start by introducing the Constructivist paradigm in IR, to determine why and how this approach is useful for our research. Then we proceed with the crucial part of the theoretical framework, which is Postcolonial theory. This thesis is grounded in Balkanism as a concept, which is a product of Postcolonial theory. Our research questions – whether students of Faculty of Political Science believe Serbian mentality exists or not, whether it is politically relevant or not, and how do they perceive themselves and political culture in Serbia is coming from the long existing debate about the position of Balkanism and Orientalism and the double entrenched belief that Serbs are both a 'heavenly people and the worst there is'. We aim to examine, through the application of discourse theory and discourse analysis, how these perceptions became internalized, if so, and whether they influence the political behavior of young people in Serbia. The third and final pillar of the theoretical framework is the theory of Political Culture, in which we aim to illustrate the theoretical concept of political culture and to examine the perception of political culture in Serbia among students later on in the research.

Constructivism

The constructivist approach explains the behavior of states in a state of anarchy (Wendt, 1992) by examining the identities and interests of states based on the meanings different objects have for them. Further, these meanings, identities, and interests are not predetermined but evolve and change through different social processes. Different agents have different influences on states' behavior, and states act and react differently to them. That is why constructivism, unlike

critical theories, focuses on actors' actions and the redefinition of identities and interests, by integrating knowledge and power to explain them. The constructivist approach highlights the role of collective meanings in shaping state identities and actions.

Intersubjectivity is a key constructivist concept. Emanuel Adler explains it profoundly in the text "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics" (1997). Intersubjectivity is something that is occurring or involving between two or more separate, conscious minds, like intersubjective communication, or intersubjective reality: something that is accessible to or capable of being established between two or more subjects. It is also understood as intersubjective knowledge or meanings that are being shared between individuals. As constructivism emphasizes the importance of intersubjective knowledge in shaping international relations, this means that shared beliefs, understandings, and norms among actors significantly influence how they perceive and interact within the international system. Intersubjective meanings exist as a collective knowledge 'that is shared by all who are competent to engage in or recognize the appropriate performance of a social practice or range of practices' (Adler 1997, 327). Because of social communication, intersubjective realities can exist and persist, which can best be understood through Benedict Anderson's notion of 'Imagined communities', i.e., nations. Thanks to intersubjective knowledge and meanings, "imagined communities" are not just physical groups of individuals; they are also their symbolic representation, practices, beliefs, institutions, and discourses that shape them and make them members of certain communities with a specific set of shared values that they collectively agree upon. Even though they are "imagined", for members of the group, they are genuine (ibid.). Shared understandings influence how groups perceive and interact within the international system. Constructivists, for example, see sovereignty as a socially constructed concept that exists because states mutually agree to recognize each other's right to exist and govern their territories based on shared norms and understandings of statehood.

Constructivism can provide a framework for analyzing how Balkan identities (or, in our case, the self-perception of Serbian identity) are socially constructed and have evolved. We can understand how specific interpretations (as well as whose interpretations) became dominant in shaping identities and practices. Stereotypes and external perceptions often characterize Balkanism and can influence how individuals within the Balkans view themselves. In our case, the constructivist approach enables us to explore how these narratives became internalized among Serbian youth, manifesting in two diametrically opposing self-perceptions – one characterized by a superiority complex as dominant ("Serbs as heavenly people") and the other by an inferiority complex as dominant ("The worst of the peoples"). This binary thinking is a characteristic of colonial ideology, which we will further explore later. Here, we must also keep in mind that certain stereotypes, or self-perceptions, can arise from within the nation and its history; therefore, they are not imposed on the people but instead originate from the group. Adler calls on Karl Popper's notion of three worlds to explain the interactions between different aspects of reality and their interrelations (Adler 1997). The worlds, which represent sub-

universes within one universe, are World 1, representing physical reality, World 2, the subjective world of conscious experiences, and World 3, the world of culture. The move from one world to another is a linguistic one, meaning that "once a function is imposed on a physical entity 'it now symbolizes something else… This move can exist only if it is collectively represented as existing. The collective representation is public and conventional, and it requires some vehicle' " (ibid.). This concept of "moving from one world to another" can be applied to understand the implications of Balkanism, and Balkanist discourse, on self-perceptions and socio-political behavior of Balkan nations, i.e., Serbs in our case.

Balkanism, as a discourse, imposes meanings and functions on the physical and social realities of the region. As a result, this creates a shared understanding that influences how Balkan nations perceive themselves and their neighbors. To move from physical reality (Popper's World 1) to social reality (World 3), specific characteristics or stereotypes are linguistically and symbolically associated with the Balkan region. For example, suppose Balkanist discourse portrays the region as inherently violent or unstable (which we have demonstrated it did throughout different historical periods). In that case, such representation can become internalized and affect the self-perceptions of nations in the region. Furthermore, nations can continue to act in ways that reinforce these stereotypes. These symbolic representations shape collective identities, interests, and behaviors. Therefore, by examining how these representations construct the idea of the Balkans, and Serbia specifically, we can gain insight into how Balkanism shapes the self-perceptions and (political) behavior of the people. This approach acknowledges the power of discourse in creating social reality. Moreover, as we will see further on, discourse is a connective tissue between Balkanism and Postcolonial theory. When analyzing students' self-perceptions of Serbia and its people, the starting point is that an established identity already exists. Therefore, we will not study identity, but rather the beliefs that shaped it and the role Balkanism plays in that relation.

Constructivism has been applied numerous times in research on the Balkans, particularly in relation to the concept of the Western Balkans and the processes of Europeanization. As Lika (2023) argues "Numerous studies have already applied constructivism and the role of ideas, narratives and discourses in the Western Balkans' debate about Europeanization and state-building as everyday practices (Musliu 2021a), the relationship between identity and Europeanization (Subotic 2011), the scope and limitations of the EU's transformative power (Elbasani 2013), the limits of the EU's normative power (Noutcheva 2009) and representations of the region in political and media discourses (Petrovic 2009)." The application of constructivism in such case studies demonstrates how ideas, thoughts, beliefs, discourses, and perceptions shape behavior in international politics. Constructivism invites us to ask who creates an identity or develops certain ideas, for whose benefit, and with what purpose. The application of constructivist approaches has proven efficient in analyzing the dynamics between two regional groups (the EU on the one side, and the Western Balkans on the other), as well as in analyzing the intergroup dynamics as influenced by external factors.

As Stefano Guzzini (2000) explains, there are three meanings of constructivism: social construction of reality, social construction of knowledge, and the interaction between these two. In this research, our focus is on the latter. To do so, we will use Discourse analysis, both as a theoretical concept and method. As stated in the introduction to this chapter, Discourse is a connective tissue between Constructivist and Postcolonial concepts, and Balkanist discourse is our focus. We will employ a mixed-methods approach, utilizing surveys to identify linguistic patterns and the most frequently mentioned topics. Later on, we will use focus groups to conduct a narrative analysis, examining the results of the surveys. By layering quantitative frequencies in a survey, with qualitative depths in focus groups, we can create a methodological mirror of the "constructivist loop" – where knowledge (or beliefs) shapes reality, which in turn reshapes knowledge (or beliefs). Maja Zehfuss points "The idea of social construction implies that what is made is something common, shared, intersubjective – something which reasonable people can agree on" (Zehfuss 2004, 261). If Balkanism constructs such and such beliefs about Balkan nations, and if these nations in return create self-perceptions based on those beliefs, we should be able to determine whether such internalized conceptions (mixed with a long historical identity such as Serbian identity) have any political implications, or are they at least perceived as influential. This is where we introduce the theory of Political culture to try to connect these approaches and come to some novel conclusions, if possible.

Postcolonial Theory

Suppose Constructivism can be understood as an approach that provides a Westphalian lens for analyzing International Relations. In that case, Postcolonial theory provides a post-Westphalian lens. Both theories acknowledge the importance of ideas and norms. Constructivism emphasizes the social construction of reality, and Postcolonialism emphasizes the role of social power in shaping normative international orders (Epstein 2014). Since the thesis's theme is Balkanism and its influence on self-perceptions and behaviors, it is grounded in Postcolonial theory. One of the reasons for that is the debate opened by Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979), which raised a new set of questions related to the legacies of the colonial period, and its broader implications, which the works of Maria Todorova, Vesna Goldsworthy or Milica Bakic-Hayden (to mention some) have connected to Balkanism despite the disagreement of the position of Balkanism *vis-a-vis* Orientalism. The emphasis on different modes of power and power relations is a direct influence of poststructuralism and Michel Foucault on Said's work. It is what makes Postcolonial theory a product of the poststructuralist turn, and part of what makes *Orientalism* by Edward Said one of the most influential books of the 1970s period and beyond.

In this part of the thesis, we aim to explain the position of Balkanism through the lens of Postcolonial theory. Prior to that, we should present the foundations of Postcolonial theory and its application in the social sciences. Defining the terms "colonialism" and "postcolonialism" is not an easy task. As David Butt argues, if we define them too narrowly, particular communities are excluded, and if we define them too broadly, then every form of power inequality can fall under the definition (Butt 2013). As the term "Balkanism" was coined within Postcolonial theory,

we will use it through these lenses and refrain from providing a novel definition for any of these terms. We will, however, provide the framework under which we study them in this research, focusing on how colonialism is imposed and persists, and how Postcolonial theory engages with them.

To understand what postcolonialism is, we need to understand what colonialism is. Simply put, colonialism can be described as the conquest and domination by European powers over large parts of the world, which peaked from the 16th century and lasted until the mid-20th century, culminating in decolonization struggles. It refers to the direct political, economic, and cultural domination and the establishment of formal colonies by foreign powers (Butt 2013). Reversing colonialism, i.e., undergoing decolonization, meant understanding how colonialism operates and how it can be sustained. According to research "What We Mean by Colonialism and Coloniality" (2024), "key forms of power used in colonialism are physical and coercive military power and economic power, which in turn may be converted into political influence and the economic structural violence that keeps so many people oppressed, poor and unhealthy. Additionally, ideas, beliefs and narratives are also a form of power used to buttress colonial system and relationships." Even if the colonization period appears to be over, colonial patterns persist and evolve daily. As Jean-Paul Sartre puts it, colonialism "is a system which was put in place around the middle of the nineteenth century, began to bear fruit in about 1880, started to decline after the First World War, and is today turning against the colonizing nation" (Sartre 2001, 129; 1964). While the 'era of colonization' is over, colonial patterns and relations persist today in form of what some call "neo-colonialism" (Nkrumah 2025). Besides open, political, and economic domination, a more subtle form of prevailing colonialism, and colonial patterns is the cultural one. That form of domination has a profound impact on individuals, as well as on entire collectives, which often creates or amplifies stereotypes and narratives about that collective. Cultural forms of colonialism and coloniality are much harder to expose and overcome, since their tools are often disguised as literary or art works and media coverage, and sometimes certain policies.

The term 'postcolonial' itself can be debated in the sense of what precisely the 'post' in postcolonial stands for. On its own, the term 'post' refers to a period after some event, or an era. In this instance, it can refer to the period after colonialism – but as J.G. Farrell in *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* (Childs & Williams 2016) points out the question of 'after whose colonialism?' arises, and answers to that are multiple, especially since "there has not been just one period of colonialism in the history of the world" (ibid., pp. 1) or just one colonial empire. European colonizers have become a dominant global force since the sixteenth century, whose mid-twentieth-century dismantling was unprecedented and followed by an anticolonial struggle, not just in the physical realm, but also in the realms of intellectual debates, academia, and literature. Postcolonial theory is inherently and automatically connected to the decolonization era; therefore, the 'post' here signifies chronologically subsequent historical events. However, postcolonial theory is much more complex than that. Besides dealing with anticolonialism in

colonized countries and the struggle for independence of people from imperial powers, the character of postcolonial theory encompasses a much wider field of study and research. It is still a developing and expanding theory, or rather an approach to dealing with the modern, more precisely, postmodern world, society, politics, history, culture, and much more. This 'post condition' of Postcolonial theory calls for a profound investigation into philosophical, as well as political and relational postmodernity, which occurs momentarily. As Aijaz Ahmad (2025) claims, "when applied to the world, […] this remarkably elastic 'postcoloniality' seems to encompass virtually everything. [Yet] when applied as a designation for theories and critics, however, the same term 'postcolonial' contracts very sharply […] to a very small number of critics with recognisably shared points of theoretical departure" (Ahmad 2025, 366). It is, therefore, crucial to explain the legitimacy of applying Postcolonial theory and concepts to the region (Balkans) that is not 'classically colonized.'

Discussing Postcolonial theory, we cannot overlook Edward Said's concept of Orientalism. As mentioned earlier, his study opened the doors to a novel way of analyzing the body of knowledge produced about the "Other," especially those affected by colonialism. For Edward Said, who employs Michel Foucault's notion of discourse to identify it, Orientalism is a political and cultural fact (Said 1979). To think of the Orient is to think of it as "an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles" (ibid., p.2). Edward Said describes Orientalism as a system of knowledge (re)production, developed across centuries and continents, by imperial powers, and …" political imperialism [that] governs an entire field of study, imagination, and scholarly institutions…" (ibid, p.14). To better understand what Orientalism is, Said writes about what Orientalism is not:

> "Orientalism is not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship, or institutions; nor is it a large diffuse collection of texts about the Orient; nor is it representative and expressive of some nefarious "Western" imperialist plot to hold down the "Oriental" world. It is rather a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; […] it is above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power by the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political (as with a colonial or imperial establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy, or any of the modern policy sciences), power cultural (as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, values) power moral (as with ideas about what "we" do and what "they" cannot do or understand as "we" do)." (ibid., p.12).

Again, we circle back to the meaning of 'post' in postcolonial. As Slemon argues, definitions of postcolonial vary widely, but one meaning of the 'post' is the one used by poststructuralism, where the meaning of 'post' does not refer to chronologically subsequent but

instead refers to a ”conceptually transcending and superseding the parameters of the other term” (quoted in Childs & Williams 2016, pp. 3-4). This definition can be best understood when analyzing the anti-colonial texts. In those, the authors are getting beyond colonialism and its ideologies, breaking free from them and counter-attacking them by engaging critically with colonial texts. Slemon explains, further on, that '… the moment colonial power inscribes itself onto the body and space of its Others," colonization has already started. European colonial powers first wrote about their "civilizational Others," in forms of individual travelogues, poets or novelists and "inscribed themselves 'onto the body and space' of those Others – long before they actually intervened against them in any properly colonialist sense (through the occupation or direct control of their territory)" (ibid.). Suppose we apply this definition of postcolonial(ism) in the context of the Balkan region, we can find many literary works that fit into the description of colonial discourse, followed by military intervention in the region, or indirect control over the territory, confirming Said's notion of knowledge being a political matter as well as scientific.

On the other hand, authors in postcolonial theory ask, "Who is the postcolonial?" The Balkans certainly are not postcolonial in terms of colonial power ruling over them directly through political, military, or economic domination. Still, when observing narratives about the Balkans and the discourse surrounding them, colonial patterns are readily apparent. As we have already emphasized, in the postmodernist paradigm, the role of ideas and beliefs is a key notion. These concepts are also meant to maintain colonial relations, as they are the focus of our research on Balkanism in Serbia, where we question 'the logic of coloniality' behind specific ideas that influence shared beliefs and behaviors among people. That logic is, according to Quijano (2017), characterized as having broader implications beyond political dominance. It refers to the ongoing structures, mindsets, and power dynamics that persist even after the end of colonial rule. Coloniality, besides encompassing political and economic inequalities, imposes cultural norms and dominance, often maintained through indirect means, such as the current politics and discourse of Euro-integration and Europeanization in the Western Balkans region (Petrovic 2022).

Furthermore, the logic of coloniality is internalized among the people who are the subjects of it; something that Alexander Kiossev describes as 'self-colonizing cultures' (2022). These cultures, according to Kiossev, are adopting certain alien, but universal models of behavior or beliefs, promoted by ("ex" colonial) powers, and by that, are traumatizing themselves into adapting to their own inferiority because, supposedly, they lack some essential substance. How is this achieved? Kiossev argues through trauma. Kiossev explains that this happens because: "…the reason for this naivete is in fact that these cultures simply did not exist before this confusion - they arose through it… " they had to 'conquer' themselves, and impose foreign values on themselves. Whether those external values about them are positive or negative seems not to matter. "The metaphor "self-colonisation" presupposes that in some hypothetical historical times, when there were no traumas and suffering, there already existed a social agent with its own stable identity - a presupposition which contradicts the empirically proven fact that before

the symbolical "self-conquering" such "Self", such an identical social agent, did not exist at all. Furthermore, the metaphor presupposes that later this social agent became in some way crazy - it discovered an inferiority complex in itself, abandoned its own values and began to "conquer" and "colonise" itself by lovingly using alien values" (Kiossev 2022). Kiossev and Quijano both connect this issue to problems of modernity and rationality that prevail in contemporary politics and international relations. However, when applied to the Balkan context, some authors like Heikkinen (2021) point to variation of 'self-colonization' known as 'self-balkanization' where Balkan societies internalize and reproduce orientalist tropes, further complicating the dynamics of identity and power, creating a space neither fully European, nor entirely Other, more like a "peripheral colony" (ibid.). This is a topic that many authors have written about, both within the Balkans and outside the region. All this, in addition to the fact that the term 'Balkanism' emerged from a Postcolonial theory perspective, provides sufficient rationale to apply postcolonial concepts in the Balkan region.

The common thread between Postcolonial theory and Balkanism, as well as a connecting point to constructivism in International Relations in this thesis, is discourse; specifically, colonial discourse and Balkanist Discourse, which are studied under this theoretical and methodological approach. Edward Said shows that there is a close relationship between colonialism and Orientalism, between being colonized and being perceived as Oriental. The Balkans are a specific place in terms of colonization and Orientalism. They are not included in Edward Said's study of Orientalism; however, Maria Todorova coined the term "Balkanism" to distinguish it from Orientalist discourse. When it comes to the Balkans, they are perceived as "semi-colonized" and therefore viewed as semi-Oriental (Detrez 2001). Raymond Detrez argues that what was taking place in the Balkans is some form of "quasi-colonization." He asks whether the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman expansions in the peninsula can be considered forms of colonialism. Moreover, the author argues that one form of power over the region was being replaced by another, yet each time with increasing influence from Western Europe. What this author also notices is that from within the region, during the period of later Ottoman rule, and beginnings of liberation from it, authors who were writing about political, economic or social situation in the region, often referred to their situation as a colonial struggle, while at the same time they perceived themselves as white, enlightened Europeans, and did not share empathy or solidarity with the "really colonized people outside Europe" (ibid.) The historical construction of the Balkans as Europe's "Other," characterized by stereotypes of backwardness and violence, echoes the Orientalist (or colonial) discourse Edward Said talks about.

Both Orientalism and Balkanism are discursive practices characterized by dialectical relationships and notions of "otherness." Similarly to how we look at the relationship between Orientalism and Balkanism, we can observe the relationship between colonial discourse and Balkanist Discourse. If we take the idea that Balkanism is a sub-species of Orientalism, then Balkanist Discourse can be categorized as a sub-species of the broader concept of colonial discourse. Alternatively, suppose we distinguish between the two and view the Balkanism as a

sui generis phenomenon, as Maria Todorova suggests, applying the same logic. In that case, Balkanist Discourse is also a *sui generis* discourse. Without reiterating the differences between the two concepts, we make two distinctions here and adopt them as our guiding principles. The first distinction concerns the relationship these two have with the concept of "Europe's Other." In the case of Orientalism, the Orient is Europe's external Other; while in the context of Balkanism, the Balkans are Europe's internal Other. Because the Orient is, literally, on the outside, discourses around it can be made more exotic and appealing. However, the Balkans are geographically located within, hence the discourses around them can be made with more rigor, and appalling, making the Balkans as something not incomplete or not completely self-actualized, within a fulfilled European "Self." Another distinction between Orientalism and Balkanism is their colonial histories. There is no doubt that around 80% of the World was once a colony under European rule. Whatever can, and is, considered to be Orient in geographical terms, whether it is the Middle East, parts of Asia, or South America and Africa, has had direct experience with colonialism.

Colonial Discourse is a powerful tool of Western dominance that enables the shaping of ideologies of superiority and justifies conquest and exploitation (Charles 1995). It has its roots in religious and civilization missions, while its modern manifestations are most recognizable through media and literature. There is an emerging field of study called Critical Discourse Studies, which deeply analyzes the colonial patterns and history of oppressive colonial structures and their legacies. One of the most significant contributions of Colonial Discourse Studies is the idea of 'otherness'. Colonial Discourse Studies, besides uncovering how colonial discourse uses otherness to emphasize the difference between colonizers and colonized, also helps uncover how these discourses continue to shape our lives today (Elaref 2023). A crucial element in Colonial and Balkanist discourses is the language used to create and perpetuate recurring representations of the "Other." The attempts of the colonizers to "civilize" the "Other" by violently exposing them to Western (European) values and cultures are one of the colonial discourse's goals. This is done by constant emphasis on the differences between the superior colonizer and the inferior, savage, colonized. Edward Said's understanding of Colonial Discourse concentrates on the binaries – East and West, colonizer and colonized, latent and manifest Orientalism. Homi Bhabha expands on this notion. For Homi Bhabha, similarities and stereotypes are the "cardinal point of subjectification", and colonial identity is between colonizer and colonized (Childs and Williams 2016). "Colonial discourse seeks, rather than manages, to produce knowledge of two distinct and antithetical colonial subjects. [… emphasizing the] Importance of 'fixity', a concept whose key discursive strategy is the stereotype, where the Other is fixed as unchangeable, known, and predictable." (ibid., p.125). According to Bhabha, 'fixity' is a crucial feature in ideological construction of "otherness", with ambivalence as central strategy in marginalization of that "Other" (Newton 1997).

The Balkanist Discourse often frames the region as a transitional place, a bridge or crossroads, rather than a fully formed entity (Dix 2015). Vesna Goldsworthy's study on British

literary imagination identified a scheme in British literary imagination concerning Eastern Europe, naming this the "literary colonization" in which the British imagination portrays that part of the continent as something different than the progressive Western part. Balkanist discourse can be traced back to the era of Romanticism in literature, and Lord Byron, according to Goldsworthy, is the Balkans' Columbus. In the same study, Goldsworthy identified that the Balkans were not considered significant enough for Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries, compared to other parts of the globe or the continent; therefore, the region did not hold as much cultural or political interest. On the contrary, Dix argues, that "the Balkans in the British imagination occupied a profoundly ambiguous role: both literary and metaphorically close enough to home to warrant little specific attention on the one hand, and yet far enough away to remain indistinct on the other" (ibid., 974). In the Balkanist Discourse, the Balkans are Europe's "incomplete self", "periphery," a "laminal place," "the Ottoman front yard." The people are, at the same time, violent, predictable, "uncivilized," unchangeable, and kind, hospitable, simple, beautiful, and manageable. According to Todorova, the Balkans are a name, a metaphor, and a geographical region that can be approached and interpreted through the notion of historical legacy (Todorova 2010). Balkanism as a discursive formation shapes and dictated the attitudes and actions toward the region, or "to put it succinctly, *balkanism* expresses the idea that explanatory approaches to phenomena in Southeastern Europe, that is, the Balkans, often rest upon a discourse (in the Foucauldian sense) or a stable system of stereotypes (for the ones who shun the notion of "discourse"), which place the Balkans in a cognitive straightjacket." (ibid., 176). Building on Goldsworthy's study, Dix claims that the Balkanist discourse, which originated in 18th- and 19th-century fiction and non-fiction literature, persisted during the Cold War era and continued well beyond it. It was present when Yugoslavia was breaking up, when the Balkan and ex-Yugoslav countries started the process of European integration, and it persists today, even when most Balkan countries are EU members.

Balkanist discourse is also present within the specific Balkan nations and different authors classified it as "nesting Orientalism", "self-balkanization," "auto-colonization…" This external mode of representation was adopted and internalized. It concerns perceptions of identity, nationality, and culture. In Serbia, among the people, we can observe these stereotypes about the self and others, as well as self-perception influenced by this discourse, together with many different (imperial) legacies. The topic is broadly studied and researched by both Balkan authors, critics, and historians, as well as those from outside the region. Our aim here is to explore how these self-perceptions are influenced by the Balkanist discourse among young people in Serbia; furthermore, we are interested in seeing how they reflect on the political culture of the people. In the next, final part of the theoretical framework, we present the premises and foundations of the Theory of Political Culture, and its application in our study.

Theory of Political Culture

The Theory of Political Culture and political culture itself are contested concepts, due to certain disagreements about their scientific application, oversimplification, and generalization,

among others (Somers 1995). It is also one of the most popular and seductive concepts in political science (Welch 1993). Stephen Welch's work lays the foundation for approaches to the theory of political culture that can be summarized by Jeffrey Goldfarb's quote, which Welch refers to as well: "Political culture – can't live with it, can't live without it" (Welch 2013). In this research, we draw on the Theory of Political Culture to explore hypotheses and questions related to self-perceptions and political culture among -Serbian youth . The Theory of Political Culture can be applied both as a conceptual bridge between Constructivism and Postcolonial approaches and as an analytical tool in our research. To implement this theory in our research, we first need to clarify its role and justify its importance. Then, we proceed to emphasize its relation to Constructivism and Postcolonial theory, making connections and demonstrating complementarities between them. We refer to the conceptualization and foundational authors of political culture theory, specifically the work of Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, as well as some contemporary approaches. Finally, we conclude by explaining how we will apply this theory in our research, specifically in the context of our study on self-perceptions and Balkanist discourse among students in Serbia.

Culture, in the most general sense, is defined as the sum of historical and artistic human creation. It is something that is regarded as having higher value, according to how humans perceive and relate to their surroundings. Culture is often equated with the word "civilization", although culture is a much broader and enduring concept than civilization is. Milan Matić writes that "According to the most general definitions, political culture would be this part of the general culture of a society that includes values, beliefs, attitudes, symbols, tendencies, and behavior patterns in relation to politics and political issues as those issues that relate to the general conditions of communal life in a society and to the choice of directions and goals of overall social life (governance of development) (Matić 1993, 830)." Therefore, political culture refers to the collective attitudes and (emotional) investments that shape political behavior and political institutions of a society. They are invisible schemes and factors that influence behaviors and institutions, and even when they seem insignificant, they can steer the course of progress and development of one country, says Edmund Berk. Many authors have written about the political and civic upbringing of citizens, as well as the importance of cultural and political education for the sustainability of the political system. To paraphrase Rousseau who said *Creating a democracy for the people is a beneficial thing, but nurturing people for democracy is even better* – political culture is to be understood as a collective behavior as well as a subjective state of mind and capabilities of members of a society to be part of a political community and envision what kind of future they want for that community, same as what past that community has and how we understand it.

Political culture helps explain how and why certain political practices, norms, and identities persist or change over time, or as Haynes (1997) puts it: "Political culture is an important variable in analysis of cultural groups, as it suggests underlying beliefs, values and opinions which a people holds dear." In the context of Serbia and Balkanism, it allows us to

examine how different historical legacies, external and internal discourse, and internalized stereotypes have influenced political behavior and become embedded in everyday political practices and self-perceptions of people. While Constructivism, on the one hand, explains *how* meanings, identities, and interests are socially constructed and negotiated, Postcolonial theory, on the other hand, highlights *whose* meanings and identities are privileged or marginalized, focusing on power relations, discourse, or the legacy of domination. Between the two approaches, the Theory of Political Culture can serve as a mechanism through which these constructed meanings and power relations become internalized, and through which we can see how those same meanings and/or internalized stereotypes are reproduced in society and politics. Therefore, while Constructivism and Postcolonial theory reveal the processes and power dynamics behind the construction of Serbian identity and perceptions of Serbia, as well as Balkanist discourse, the Theory of Political Culture enables us to analyze how these discourses are absorbed by individuals and groups, shaping collective beliefs and influencing political behavior and attitudes. Political culture helps bridge the gap between abstract discourses and observable political attitudes and practices. It also serves as a framework for empirically investigating the political relevance of beliefs and self-perceptions about Serbian mentality.

Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, in their study *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (1963), have defined political culture as "the pattern of individual attitudes and orientations towards politics among the members of a political system." Their book popularized the political culture. Almond and Verba identified three types of political culture in their comparative analysis of five nations: parochial political culture, subject political culture, and participant political culture. According to these authors, the characteristics of the first type include low participation and expectations for political change, members of society do not have specialized political roles and are not effective in influencing the political system, the system relies on familistic and somewhat tribal patterns and relations. The second type of culture has citizens with a high cognitive and evaluative orientation towards the political system, who are rather detached and passive when it comes to actively participating in politics. Verba and Almond classify this type of political culture as the most compatible with authoritarian regimes and structures. The third type, participant political cultures, has citizens who are highly involved in political (and democratic) processes of their political system. They are highly educated, well-informed, and active participants in the political system. Almond and Verba focused on factors that influence political behavior and political culture. In essence, they identified four factors: family traditions, educational systems, media exposure, and peer groups and community organizations.

In our research, we apply the concept of political culture to analyze the perceptions and attitudes towards the Serbian mentality and its political relevance among young people. We begin with Balkanism and the perception of the Balkans and its general culture. We include the perception of different (civilizational) legacies left on the region, as well as different instruments used to disseminate Balkanist discourse and the notion of "otherness" among the peoples of the

region. The concept of political culture has empirical application and value here. Through surveys and focus groups, we intend to analyze students' beliefs, values, and perceptions, connecting them to broader historical and discursive patterns.

Methodology

Mixed-method approach

This thesis questions students' self-perceptions about their country, people, and political culture in relation to the Balkanist discourse and Balkanism. To answer questions posed in this

research, i.e., do students believe Serbian mentality exists, and if yes, is it politically relevant, we opted for a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods, relying on discourse analysis both as a theory and a method. The reason for choosing mixed methods is that combining both qualitative and quantitative data can lead to a clearer understanding of research problems (Creswell, 2018). Using mixed methods, we are integrating the data collected through a survey, which has both closed and open-ended questions, and includes both quantitative and qualitative questions. This means that in the first stage of the research, we are concurrently collecting qualitative and quantitative data, which will later be supported by qualitative data collected through a focus group in which we will employ narrative analysis of the results collected from the survey. For the first phase, we conducted a survey among Political Science students at the University of Belgrade. The survey consists of three connected subsections, each exploring one of three themes. Questions are both closed and open-ended. The first theme concerns perceptions of the Balkan region; the second explores perceptions of Serbia within the context of Balkanism; and the third examines the general perception of Serbia's political culture. The survey measures both quantitative and qualitative data. After collecting the data in the first phase, the researcher analyzes the answers and synthesizes them to provide a broad overview of the thematic areas in the survey, namely the section about the Balkans and Balkanism, the section about Serbia, and the section about political culture. By doing this, the researcher creates a database of different recurring answers in order to set the scene for discussion in the focus group and narrative analysis of the answers. The goal is to either confirm or disconfirm the results of the collected data in the first phase.

Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method

Discourse is “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)” (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002, 1). Discourse analysis is both a theory and a method. It is widely accepted and used across disciplines. There is no single fixed method in discourse analysis that is applied uniformly across all research. Instead, discourse analysis is such a theory and method that, as long as its philosophical, i.e., theoretical and methodological premises are respected and implemented, “it is possible to create one’s own package by combining elements from different discourse analytical perspectives” (ibid., pp.3-4). Discourse analysis is rooted in poststructuralism; it can reveal the reasons why state A considers state B an enemy or illustrate how people categorize and think about the world (Neuman GODINA). According to Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) some of the key aspects of discourse analysis are as follows: 1. Taking a critical approach to taken-for-granted knowledge, meaning that our knowledge of the world should not be treated as objective truth, but rather as a product of how people categorize and reflect reality that is ‘out there’; 2. Understanding historical and cultural specificity, meaning that our views and knowledge are results of exchanges among people over history, and can be changed or could have been built differently, i.e., there is no pre-determined or pre-given and fixed set of knowledge about social reality; 3. “Knowledge is created through social interaction in which we construct common truths and compete about what is true and false” (link between

knowledge and social processes) (p.5); and 4. There is a link between knowledge and social construction, meaning that different social understandings lead to different social actions.

There are many different approaches to applying discourse theory and analysis, which makes this approach flexible and applicable to many different contexts. Just as society is not a fixed structure, according to discourse analysis thinkers, the approaches to discourse analysis are also not fixed. In this research, we refer to Laclau and Mouffe's discourse analysis, as they can be described as one of the 'founding fathers' (or better, parents) of this scientific approach. "Some approaches [to discourse analysis] focus on the fact that discourses are created and changed in everyday discursive practices and therefore stress the need for systematic empirical analysis of people's talk and written language in, for instance, the mass media or research interviews. Other approaches are more concerned with general, overarching patterns and aim at a more abstract mapping of the discourses that circulate in society at a particular moment in time or within a specific social domain" (Jorgensen and Phillips 2001, 20) – Laclau and Mouffe's falls under the latter approach that is concerned about more general, and abstract discourses. This means that Laclau and Mouffe view discourses as being fluid, rather than fixed, and as susceptible to change, influenced by various actors and events. Their view presupposes certain signs or nodal points of every discursive practice, and a struggle between meaning and potential meaning that can be ascribed to a discursive practice. This is called "field of discursivity," and it encompasses all the potential meanings and possibilities that the prevailing discourse excludes at the moment (ibid).

To illustrate this, we can examine how discourses on Serb identity were shaped in relation to the Battle of Kosovo and the Kosovo myth. On one hand, the nodal point is the sacrifice of Prince Lazar and the choice he made to "join the Heavens above" before winning on Earth that created discourse about Serbs as 'heavenly people' who are willing to sacrifice themselves for greater causes; on the other hand the same choice can be used as a nodal point from which the discourse of victimhood arises, and portrays the Serb identity as inferior one, where they are the ones always fighting against the bigger powers and the victim of their oppression \. Which one of the two presented discourse practices prevails depends on the signs we attribute to the nodal points. This means that meanings and discourses can change. Laclau and Mouffe's discourse analysis poses the exact question of how structure is constituted, and discursive practices are formed and transformed. To take this on the next level and apply it to our research, we analyze how Balkanist discourses are understood and accepted among the youth in Serbia. We rely on discourse analysis from other sources and studies, which are examined primarily in the Literature Review section of the thesis, drawing on concepts from various theoretical approaches to create questions and prompt the focus group discussion for the methodological part of the thesis.

Empirical Analysis and Research Results

Survey

The survey was conducted solely among the students at the Faculty of Political Science (FPS), University of Belgrade. Research is focused on political science students due to their educational emphasis on politics and political developments. Answers were collected online, and the survey was open from May 29, when it was approved by the student plenum of the FPS, and closed on July 21. The survey was created and conducted in Serbian, and the author of this thesis later translated it. Considering the current socio-political situation and repression towards students, the survey was completed by only 19 students. The participants were not asked about their age or level of study. The only criterion was that they were students at the FPS from all levels of study, regardless of whether they participated in the blockades of the Faculty. For this stage of research, I found that information to be irrelevant. It is neither a significant nor large enough sample, from which we could deduce answers that are representative of the entire group of students at the FPS. Still, answers are indicative, and could be used to provide an answer to the research question of this thesis, which is: "Do students in Serbia believe 'Serbian mentality' exists and whether it is politically relevant?" The following section provides answers to previously posed and explained questions.

First part – self-perceptions of the Balkans. The first set of questions is related to the perceptions and self-perceptions of the Balkan region. These questions aim to determine how students perceive the Balkan Peninsula, the states that comprise this region, and their sentiments towards the region. There are sixteen questions in total in this part of the survey. The first four questions are: how would you describe the Balkans, what countries belong to the Balkan region, what do they have in common, and what makes them different? By posing these questions in this way, we aim to explore the students' position and understanding of the region and test whether they share similar opinions on the topic. The fifth question is whether students perceive the Balkans as positive, neutral, or negative. Here, we aim to collect data that will demonstrate the general sentiment towards the region. In the following question, we ask students about their beliefs regarding how they shape their perception of the Balkans, as well as the actors or events that influence those beliefs.

The following six questions concern the "influencers" of perceptions, i.e., media, literature, popular art, and social sciences. We ask students whether they think the media plays a role in shaping perceptions about the Balkans, and whether that role is perceived as positive, neutral, or negative. We also ask whether literature, movies, music, and social sciences create certain perceptions about the Balkans, where students need to answer "Yes" or "No". The thirteenth question concerns the legacy of the Great Empires in the Balkan region – we ask which of the following civilizations had a greater impact on the Peninsula: the Byzantine Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Russian Empire, or some other Empire. The last three questions are: 1. Do you believe that "Balkan mentality" exists, and if yes,

is it politically relevant?; 2. Are you familiar with the terms “Balkanism” and “to balkanize”, and 3. Do they notice the presence of the Balkanist discourse in any areas of social and political life, and which ones? The first set of questions is general, as we explore and analyze perceptions, identities, mechanisms, and external influences related to the Balkans, both within the region and from broader perspectives. We want to prompt respondents to articulate their understanding of what constitutes the Balkans, both geographically and conceptually, as well as to reflect on regional identity and diversity.

Second part – perceptions of Serbia in the Balkans. The following sequence of the survey examines the self-perceptions of Serbia in the context of Balkanism. This part comprises twenty-four questions, which explore personal and collective identity in Serbia, cultural and historical legacies, stereotypes, and the impact of current events on students’ perceptions of Serbia and its people. The questions aim to mix factual, opinion-based, and reflective prompts to gain an understanding of how individuals relate to Serbian identity and self-perception. The majority of these questions relate to historical influences in Serbia. We aim to examine how historical events and legacies are perceived in the present, so that we can understand the dynamics between historical legacies and self-perceiving narratives among people in Serbia in the following phase of the research. These questions follow the same structure. First, we ask which of the presented empires had the most significant influence on Serbia (the Byzantine Empire, the Ottomans, the Austro-Hungarians, or some others). Then we ask the same set of questions about the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires, i.e., how they are viewed in Serbia, as positive, neutral, or negative. Furthermore, we ask students to identify both the positive and negative aspects of these legacies, as well as one or more important legacies from these Empires. Another two questions are dedicated to the perception of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its legacy in Serbia. We also ask students whether they feel like residents of Serbia and, if so, whether their identity is strictly Serbian, strictly Balkan, or a combination of both. The aim is to determine overlaps between self-perceptions of the Balkans and Serbia, and to investigate whether they influence one another, or even more, whether they influence political behavior in Serbia in the following phase of the research. Another question posed at this point is the importance of Serbia's geographical position, its significance, and influence on how other European countries perceive Serbia from the students’ standpoint.

There are seven questions at this point that explore the national character and stereotypes in Serbia. We ask students if they believe there is a “Serbian mentality” and if it is politically relevant. Then we ask what some of the characteristics of this mentality (if they believe it exists) are, and how this mentality affects the political situation in the country. While reading the extensive literature about Balkanism and Serbs, we came across the notion of the Serbian people as a violent one, so we asked the students if they think Serbs are collectively prone to violence, and if so, we asked how they would explain such behavior. Another notion we come across when talking to Serbs is the notion of Serbs as “heavenly people.” So, we asked the students if they believe Serbs are “heavenly people” and what would explain that notion the best. The last

question posed at this point is whether the current socio-political situation has changed their perception of Serbia and its people. With this set of questions, we aim to explore in depth individual perceptions of Serbia and open up thinking about the connections between these self-perceptions and political behavior, which will be examined in the third and final part of the survey, related to political culture in Serbia.

Third part – perception of political culture in Serbia.. The questions in the third part of the survey can be sub-categorized into four groups. The first group of questions concerns societal and political reflections and consists of four questions: 1. What qualities define a "civilized world/behavior"; 2. Is Serbian society "uncivilized"; 3. Are Serbian politicians a reflection of the Serbian people as a collective, and 4. Is the Serbian people's behavior a reflection of Serbian politicians? The purpose of these questions is to explore how respondents define the concept of a "civilized world" and to assess whether Serbian society and its political actors are perceived as meeting those standards. These questions aim to uncover attitudes toward societal values, political culture, and collective identity in Serbia, highlighting potential gaps between idealized norms and lived realities, or perceptions of Serbian society and politics, as well as the impact of historical and cultural narrative on national self-perception(s).

Another set of questions aims further to explore the political culture and its historical influences. We ask: Does Serbia's political culture differ significantly from other Balkan states? Does Serbia's political culture differ from that of other European states? Do Byzantine, Ottoman, or Austro-Hungarian legacies influence Serbia's political culture? How would they describe the political culture in Serbia? Do they believe people in Serbia possess a developed political culture and awareness? How would they describe the level of political awareness among youth in Serbia? Furthermore, do politicians in Serbia possess a developed political culture and awareness? The purpose of these questions is to investigate the nature and development of Serbia's political culture and the influence of historical legacies on contemporary political behavior. We want to assess how Serbia's political culture is perceived in relation to the region and broader Europe and explore the impact of major historical empires on shaping Serbia's political culture, reflecting how these historical experiences continue to influence current political norms and practices. We also aim to understand how students describe and evaluate the current state of political culture among the general population, youth, and politicians, thereby gauging civic engagement and the maturity of the political system. In general, these questions aim to illuminate how historical memory influences Serbia's political dynamics and societal attitudes today.

The final sub-categories of this part of the survey concern the notion of autocolonization, Balkanism, and stereotypes. We ask the following questions: Are Serbian society and politics "autocolonized", does Balkanism (discourse about the "Other") influence attitudes towards politics and society, and how would they describe the link between self-perceptions and political culture in Serbia? Then, we ask whether stereotypes about Serbia influence political engagement, if so, how, and whether that influence is positive, neutral, or negative. These questions aim to

examine how students perceive external and internal discourses on Serbian society and politics. We want to assess whether Serbian society and politics are seen as "autocolonized", i.e., influenced or dominated by internalized colonial attitudes. We also examine how the discourse of "Balkanism" affects how people in Serbia view their own politics and society. Additionally, we aim to explore the connection between how people in Serbia see themselves and their political culture, and whether the stereotypes (both external and internal) shape certain national narratives, or motivate or discourage political participation.

Survey Results

First part – self-perceptions of the Balkans. When asked how they would describe the Balkans, the most common answers were that it is a "melting pot" and a "powder keg," as well as an unstable, backward, and underdeveloped region, with rich histories and different civilizational legacies and complex identities, and as a crossroads of civilizations. The Balkans, to some, is a place of complexities, a special spirit that cannot be described, but only lived and experienced. It is a place with significant symbolic meanings. Few answers described the Balkans as a "geographical and cultural term" with unclear geographical borders. Honest, hyperactive, passionate, and the most beautiful part of Europe are some of the adjectives ascribed to the region. Most of the answers included the word "conflict," as in: "legacy of conflict," "countries often in conflict," and conflict conveyed a meaning that suggests people are easily offended and disturbed by external actors who push them into conflict. The Balkans are the "barrel of rakija" (the most famous Serbian brandy) in which everyone enjoys, unless someone from outside intervenes in the region. One interesting answer was that the Balkans are "the Middle East, only it is in Europe." Bribery, corruption, sadness, sorrow and grief, a shortcut to many, a priority to very few, someone described.

The answers to the question of which countries belong to the Balkans, varied significantly. The majority classified the following countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia (all ex-Yugoslav countries), plus Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, and the European part of Turkey. Some excluded Slovenia in its entirety but included only parts of the country; one answer was that Croatia "self-excluded" from the Balkans. One answer distinguished between cultural, political, and geographical affiliation. Some included parts of Italy and Moldova as part of the Balkans. Some answers excluded Greece from the Balkans, while others stated that others do not include Greece, despite its geographical position. Interesting answer that signals "othering" is "God regrets the day when the Turks set foot in Europe," which made them think they are part of the Balkans and consequently Europe (a paraphrase of the answer). In general, it seems that most think of Balkan countries simply in terms of ex-Yugoslav countries, even though only a few answers mentioned Yugoslavia.

When asked about similarities and differences between Balkan countries, the most common similarity was the *mentality*, while the most significant difference was religion. Political systems are perceived as both similar and different, depending on their distinct histories. Culture

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and language are both perceived as common threads and diversifying factors. War, and war legacies also. Foreign occupation, resistance, *inat*, superstitions, cunning and resourceful people, with soul and care for others, are similar in all Balkan countries. Corruption, pessimism, and crime are present in both categories, but their levels are perceived differently. Again, one interesting example of "othering" arose, regarding the level of testosterone in men: high levels are present among all Balkan men except men in Croatia and Slovenia. When asked in general how they perceived the Balkans, students responded as follows: positive (57.9%), neutral (36.8%), and negative (5.3%).

The group of questions exploring the factors that influence perceptions of the Balkans (questions 6 to 12) shows almost unanimous agreement among participants that the media has the most significant influence on perceptions of the region. Alongside media[3], what they found to be influencing the perceptions are politics (either political developments, leaders, or institutions), again, war legacies, and mentality. However, traveling throughout the region, education, surroundings, and friendships are also perceived as factors, mainly in a positive light. Examinees find the role of literature, popular art, movies, and music to be influential factors in creating certain perceptions about the Balkans (see graphs 1.3, 1.4, and 1.5). Around 80% of examinees believe that social sciences, too, play a role in shaping perceptions about the Balkans, with History taking the leading position, followed by Sociology, Political Sciences, International Relations, and Diplomacy. Honorable mentions go to Anthropology and Culturology. Answers from the survey worth mentioning here regarding the role of sciences are these: "The Balkan people are generally quasi-literate, they have a very bad education system. Simply, people who receive higher education in the humanities and social sciences make a minimal contribution to changing or influencing perceptions of the Balkans. A diploma is here a means of evidence for better job prospects. Corruption plays too big a part," and the one answer that states that what influences our perception depends on which standpoint we look at things: "for public opinion, crucial are media and art (movies), while for us who are in higher education, perception is predominantly influenced by science and professional literature." These latter answers represent a sort of self-perception that will be discussed during the focus group as a potential discursive practice.

Question 13 "Which of the following civilizations had the most influence on the Balkans: Byzantium, Ottoman Empire, Austro-Hungary, Russian Empire, or other?" more than half examinees answered the "Ottoman Empire." The Byzantine Empire was next, with a remark that it had the most positive influence on the peninsula, while the Ottomans devastated it, which later on, Russians and Austro-Hungarians tried to fix, but communism dealt the final blow to the region. For some, the Austo-Hungarian and Ottoman Empire had the same level of influence alongside the USSR and SFRJ, which were mentioned for their legacy of communism, "fear of authority," and brutalist architecture. Seventeen examinees were introduced before with the

[3] Almost 90% of examinees recognize media as an influential actor (see Graph 1.1.), while the majority perceive the role media plays as negative (see Graph 1.2.),

terms “balkanism” and “balkanisation” and had perceived the presence of the Balkanist discourse in social and political arenas.[4] Media, educational system, relations to and with other people and religions, all pertain to a Balkanist discourse. To quote one answer: “It is very present, from ordinary human conversations to the public discourse of the highest political representatives.” Fourteen examinees say that 'Balkan mentality' exists, and that it is politically relevant. Some see Balkan mentality as a cultural phenomenon that, if accepted, would mean also accepting certain negative stereotypes about the self and the region, which, for this participant, means discrimination toward oneself and others. On the other hand, participants recognize that Balkan mentality exists, is politically relevant, and must be examined and dealt with in order to avoid simplified and stereotypical (mis) interpretations. Characteristics of this “Balkan mentality” would be stubbornness, reluctance to change, and acceptance of change, with the tendency toward authoritarianism, and “hush, it could be worse than it is” attitude. While for some, “Balkan mentality” as such does not exist, and is not relevant, still, there are some characteristics common to all the Balkan peoples.

Second part – perceptions of Serbia in the Balkans. Eighteen out of nineteen respondents feel like Serbian citizens, while nine of them say that their identity is only Serbian, and seven of them claim both. For one, Serbian identity takes precedence, but if asked to identify him/herself in a global context, it would be a Balkan identity that is put in the first place. All examinees claim that Serbia’s geographical position is crucial for the country’s perception in the politics of other European countries. Almost 70% of participants say that the Ottoman Empire has had the most impact on Serbia, followed by the Byzantine Empire, and Russia/USSR.[5] We presupposed that Byzantine and Ottoman legacies would be very significant, so we asked in the survey how respondents perceive them and which aspects of those legacies they find to have a positive and negative influence on Serbia. The Byzantine legacy in Serbia is mainly perceived as positive (57.9%), while many see it as more neutral (36.8%) than negative (1%). As the most positive legacy, examinees listed literacy, cultural and artistic developments, Christianity, the Nemanjic dynasty, and rich architecture. Autocracy, elitism, centralization, and the cult of a strong leader are perceived as a negative legacy. Christianity and the Serbian Orthodox Church are perceived as positive, negative, and as the most important legacies of the Byzantine Empire in Serbia, at the same time. Results indicate that Orthodoxy and continued Serbian identity, alongside literacy and the spirit of the people, remain the most significant aspects of Byzantium today. When asked the same questions about the Ottoman Empire, students mainly perceive it as negative (57.9%),

[4] Quote from the survey: “Yes, the presence of the Balkanist discourse can be observed in several areas of socio-political life. First of all, it is visible in the media, where the Balkans are often portrayed as "other", that is, as opposed to the "developed West". This kind of rhetoric often encourages stereotypes about the Balkans as a region of chaos, conflict and underdevelopment. A similar pattern is present in political narratives, where Balkanist discourse is used to emphasize national divisions or justify problems within the system, often through phrases that point to "our uniqueness" or "the impossibility of change". Also, this way of thinking is noticeable in international relations, where the Balkans are sometimes approached with prejudice, using a paternalistic tone and imposing solutions "from above", with the assumption that this region is not capable of independent and stable governance.”

[5] Quote: “The Byzantium civilized Serbia, while Turkish occupation devastated Serbian mentality.”

neutral (31.6%) and positive (10.5%), while food and cuisine are perceived as the most positive legacy. There are also mentions of multiethnicity, hygiene, and rich architecture. When it comes to the negative and most important legacies of empire in question, many answered that the mentality of subservience, corruption, distrust in political institutions, and oppression are the ones that take the lead, alongside ethnic and religious division, intolerance, and the tendency to self-pity and 'jinx'. Orientalism is mentioned as a legacy of the Ottoman Empire as well. The examinees were asked to describe the Austo-Hungarian Empire and its legacy in Serbia, too. The answers to these questions indicate that the perception of Austro-Hungarians is slightly more positive than the perception of Ottomans, but still not as positive as the perception of the Byzantine legacy. Architecture, the rule of law, discipline, systematization and modernization, enlightenment, anti-Serb rhetoric, mentality, and colonization are perceived as the legacy of this Empire in Serbia.

The majority of the survey participants believe that Serbian mentality exists, which answers our research question (see Graph 2.1). The perception of that mentality and its characteristics shows ambiguity. On the one hand, people are warm, welcoming, and willing to help anyone at any time. On the other hand, they are stubborn, sarcastic, irrational, prone to self-destruction and fatality, and pessimistic. The examinees' answers demonstrate, literally and figuratively, the dichotomous self-perception of Serbia and people's identity equating it to mentality – "you, Serb, are the worst" and "we are Heavenly people" (quotes from the survey). That Serbian mentality also has an ambiguous to negative impact on politics and political culture in Serbia. To quote one participant: "Serbian mentality (if it exists) is shaped by centuries-long struggle for survival, and leans on pride, defiance, and deeply rooted collective memory. In politics, these patterns often complicate institutional stability and trust in democratic processes. Dialogue is also difficult because of that pride and defiance" – this summarizes the general perception of how Serbian mentality influences politics and political culture in Serbia. Participants said that it (Serbian mentality) has a negative impact and that it perpetuates the subject political culture, in which people see everything as negative (again, pessimism as a characteristic of Serbian mentality). There are two modes of behavior and beliefs (or ideas) that are conflicted under the Serbian mentality, according to the answers from the survey– one which is prone to accept the existing reality passively, self-victimizes and is prideful to a fault, and the other which is prone to revolt and insurgency, beliefs in freedom as a principal and is brave to a fault. This is precisely the battlefield of political culture, as Matić says (Matić 1993, 831-833).

One of the traits, or characteristics, Balkanist discourse perpetuates about the Serbian population (and Balkan people in general) is that they are violent, or prone to excessive violence. Therefore, we asked the students whether they believe Serbian people, as a collective entity, are violent. The majority (73.7%) answered they do not believe it. However, those who said the opposite (26.3%) explain such behavior as a result of anger issues, and an inability to control emotions, a centuries-long war history, the feeling that we are always against the whole world as a nation, and the belief that only brute force can have results here. We can analyze this as a

reflection of an inferiority complex, in which people often feel powerless and behave extremely because of a sense of not having power or control over the reality around them. On the other hand, another trait specific to what Serbian people think or believe of themselves, that signals the superiority complex, is the notion of "Serbs as Heavenly people," so we ask the students do they believe Serbs to be "Heavenly people," and if yes, what does that mean to them. That Serbs are "Heavenly people" is believed by around 40% of questioned students, while almost 60% of them do not believe that to be true. Those who do believe it explain that Serbs proudly wear the epithet of "Heavenly people" because, despite being a relatively small nation, they are present in all social, global arenas and have many individuals who have made an incredibly significant contribution to world science and sport. The answers explain that Serbs are the most beautiful people in the world, very courageous, dominant, and unstoppable when they set their minds to achieve a goal (this being the other side of the coin), led by the principles of freedom and Orthodoxy. Those who do not believe Serbs to be "Heavenly people" still ascribe certain traits that make Serbs different: e.g., "empathy and solidarity that, compared to others, makes us different and 'better'" (quotes from survey).

Lastly, we ask the students about the current situation in the country, and whether new social and political developments have influenced, or changed, how they perceive themselves and people in Serbia. This question is set as an introduction to the third part of the survey, in which we question the perception of political culture in Serbia. Eight participants, or 42.1% say that the current socio-political situation has not influenced how they perceive Serbia and its people, while the other participants' answer was yes (11 of them, or 57.9%). We will examine why this is important in the focus group.

Third part – perception of political culture in Serbia. When asked about what the qualities of the "civilized world" are, students' answers can be summarized as follows: they believe that the civilized world, or behavior, means overcoming conflict by leading a dialogue, being educated, responsible, and respectful of law and personal space, and valuing individualism, freedom, and justice. The majority of students think that Serbian society is civilized, while only four of them find it to be uncivilized. Students do not believe that politicians resemble the Serbian population, nor that the people can identify with the politicians in Serbia, and we will question this in the next phase. When asked whether political culture in Serbia essentially differs from the political culture in other Balkan states, the majority of students think that it is not that different (73.7%). At the same time, they believe it to be much different from the political culture in other European states (78.9%). The majority of questioned students believe that the legacy from the Ottoman Empire has had a bigger influence on political culture in Serbia (84.2% of them), while they find the Byzantine legacy influence to be much lesser (57.9%). When it comes to the Austro-Hungarian legacy and its influence on the political culture in Serbia, the ratio is almost 50-50; 47.4% of examinees do not find that the Austro-Hungarian legacy influences political culture, while 52.6% think it does.

Students describe the political culture in Serbia negatively. They say that the political culture was influenced by different, positive, and negative imperial legacies, and is still trying to deal with the past and build political institutions. They also describe it as underdeveloped, primitive, parochial, poor, nonexistent, authoritarian, traditional, subject, corrupt, violent, unscrupulous, greedy, and alienated. They perceive that Serbian people are uninformed about their role in society and the political arena, and do not understand the *raison d'être* of the state and institutions; they also think that even with superficial changes in the political system and some transition, political culture is "still set on some past settings" and is unchanged. Students observe that people believe their political participation will not contribute to change, that people do not trust political representatives and parties, leading to apathy and political abstinence. Students believe that better education could be a solution for the underdeveloped political culture in Serbian society, in which politics is perceived as something "dirty and unfair." Students do not believe that people in Serbia have a developed political culture, and they say that is due to a combination of historical legacy, socio-economic challenges[6], lack of trust in institutions and politicians, and poor education.[7] Students perceive the people in Serbia to be prone to manipulations and misinformation because of poor education and media literacy, and to observe the political system and elections only through personal benefits, and still follow the cult of a leader.[8] Students also believe that the level of political awareness among people in Serbia is low. They explain it similarly to how they explain the lack of political culture. They also add that there is no functioning system, and people believe whatever the media says; there is no criterion that could measure the level of political awareness. At the same time, everyone believes themselves to be an expert on every subject, but remains apolitical, and does not essentially understand what politics is.

The change in perception comes when asked about the level of political awareness among their peers and youth in Serbia in general. All of the examinees answered almost unanimously the question about the level of political awareness among youth. They see it positively, describe it as much better than what the older generations have, and they believe in change. Especially since the start of the student protests, the perception of youth's political engagement and political awareness has changed for the better: "I would say that it is on some middle level now, but tends to get higher," "Awakened political awareness can only develop for the better [in the future]," "We now have the unique opportunity to make a historical overview – that from our generation forward, every new generation becomes more politically literate" – these are some of the ways students described the political awareness of their peers. Only two examinees from the survey perceive the political awareness among youth to be low. When asked whether politicians in

[6] To paraphrase and summarize several answers from the survey: people are occupied with survival and having bread on the table; they do not have the time to think about politics.
[7] People in Serbia are "functionally illiterate"
[8] Quote from the survey: "Serbs are prone to manipulation, they are poorly educated. People often do not understand most of the terms that politicians talk about, let alone how our constitution or the entire state system works. They only know that they are voting for a cult of personality. There is no rational thinking and view of reality among Serbs, you can serve Serbs anything and easily deceive them."

Serbia have a developed political awareness, more than half of the examinees think they do not (63.2%). At the same time, 82.4% of the examiners think that politicians also lack a developed political culture. Students do not find Serbian society to be “autocolonised”, but they do find Serbian politics to be “autocolonised” (see Graphs 3.1 and 3.2). Students think that certain stereotypes about Serbia influence political behavior negatively. Present stereotypes are ones such as corruption, the idea that change is not possible, the “there is no one better than us” mindset, leader cult, nepotism, a tendency to be bribed, and a perception of being incapable; all politicians are the same, and state and political institutions are not functional. The survey shows that the most common stereotype that is internalized is the one that portrays the Serbs as incapable of change, a.k.a. as people with a certain mentality. Finally, we asked the student to describe the connection between self-perceptions and political culture in Serbia. They see it as disproportionate, almost nonexistent, and challenging. They observe that many Serbian citizens believe nothing can ever be changed, that they love to degrade themselves and internalize the inferiority complex about themselves through ‘balkanism’ and “srbism”, to quote one answer: “We believe we are the worst, and that situation cannot be changed.” The survey shows that students think that Balkanism, as a discourse of the Other, influences the way people in Serbia approach politics and society.

Focus Group and Narrative Analysis

We conducted one focus group with five students of the FPS, in which they were presented with the answers from the survey they initially participated in. Participation in the focus group was voluntary, i.e., at the end of the survey, students were asked to sign up for participation in the next phase if they were interested in doing so. During the focus group, students were asked to give personal and subjective opinions about the presented answers and analyze the possible narratives that could be seen throughout the answers. The first topic discussed in the focus group was Balkanism and students’ perception of the Balkans through the lense~~s~~ of Balkanist discourse, followed by a discussion on the so-called Serbian mentality, and perception of political culture as a closing theme of the discussion.

In general, students agreed that defining the Balkan~~s~~ peninsula, its borders, and inhabitants is contextual, meaning that the definition could be geography-based, politically based, or culturally based, not just for people outside the region, but also for the inhabitants of the peninsula. Students showed awareness of the colonial discourse that was used to describe the region. Intertwining of different occupations, wars, history, past and present political context, as well as the likelihood and/or (un)happiness of “being the Balkan” are the factors that influence the definition of the region. Balkanist discourse instead portrays the Balkans as a cultural term rather than a geographical one, even though it is the most accurate way of defining the Balkans. Students recognize the Balkanist discourse in everyday politics and culture in examples where one of the sides tries to deny the other side's class, territory, or geopolitical position, turning to Balkanism or, to quote the student, to “semantic vicissitudes” that label the one as Balkan. As an example of that discursive practice, students mention Croatia’s joining the EU. That moment

unmade the country Balkan, while the rest of the ex-Yugoslav countries, except Slovenia, remained to be seen as "Western Balkan" countries together with Albania. Participants' emphasis on geographical vs. historical-political criteria reflects the fragmentation and ambiguity inherent in Balkan identity, which is fluid, contested, and contextualized differently by individuals, confirming, once again, Maria Todorova's notion of Balkanism. There is also ambivalence in accepting or rejecting Balkan identity, which reveals internalized colonial discourse. On the other hand, participants of the focus group see this internalized discourse and notions of mentality as essentialist and problematic, reflecting on the youths' critical self-awareness. While survey results do not explicitly show this, during the conversation, we came across these types of sentiments towards the perceptions and connotations of the Balkans and Serbia. It might be that on the surface, people internalize the notion of having a mentality and other essentialist traits, but once we try to dig deeper, people realize this and see it as problematic. This was evident when students were presented with results from the survey about the most and the least common perceptions of the Balkans, and the positive or negative values of those perceptions. Terms in question were "mentality" and "religion". They were asked to determine which of the given terms was most common and which was perceived as the last common attribute of the region. While the survey showed that examinees believe mentality is the most common thing among all the Balkan countries, and religion is the least common, participants in the focus group saw them as overlapping and as relationally intertwined. While rejecting the notion of mentality as scientifically irrelevant, participants acknowledge the role religious heritage plays in forming the Balkan identity and cultural and behavioral patterns. Participants in the focus group and survey results both show the reproduction of certain oriental stereotypes, proving that the narratives about the Balkans are embedded in historical and political contexts and align with constructivist and postcolonial theoretical perspectives.

When it comes to the concept of legacy, participants confirm that the legacy of conflict is something they associate most with the Balkan region – again, proving that when students here think about the Balkans, they think about the former Yugoslavia, and not the entire geographical region. On the other hand, regarding Ottoman and Byzantine legacies, they locate ambiguity in it again, meaning that it is contextual, and depends on the point of view – for some people Ottoman and Byzantine legacies can be primarily positive, for some mostly negative, it depends on what aspect of that legacy we observe and evaluate. What all students agreed on is that adding positive or negative value to specific legacies cannot be very helpful in the long term, arguing also that the burden of legacy is still heavy on the Balkan people, and that it adds to the negotiation of identity and political behavior. Complex and layered legacies shape the political culture and highlight tensions between unifying cultural elements and divisive historical experiences. When it comes to Serbia specifically, the absence of a clearly defined and trustworthy political system is seen as the reason for misunderstandings and hindered dialogue in society and with other regional actors. Here, for example, students observed the geographical differences among people in Serbia and the imperial legacy that is most associated with that region in shaping political and social views. Participants argued that the legacies are developed and used depending on the

needs and the historical moment. Nevertheless, the fact that some aspect of those legacies can be extracted, whether based on historical analysis or not, is not so important for political use and can be used for perpetuating different conflicts even today.

The concept of internalization of the logic of colonialism was not something that some of the focus group participants had in mind when thinking about the "image" of the Balkans, nor about Serbia. However, when shown the meaning and mechanism behind the logic of colonialism, they noticed the ambiguity and confusion regarding the dual self-perception of Serbs. Narratives about victimhood and superiority that shape in-group solidarity, but out-group distinctions, serve political and social functions pertinent to political culture analysis. Those beliefs and actions that follow them are (jokingly) described by one of the participants as "national schizophrenia," in which people seem unable to distinguish between personal and collective wins and losses. To demonstrate it, participants used the many victories of Novak Đoković, and other sportsmen and women as something to be collectively proud of, as if it were a collective, national achievement. On the other hand, war crimes or controversial judicial and international convictions that clearly state the individual guilt and responsibility are also used to put collective, national shame on the entire population.[9] These contradictory self-images that Serbs negotiate, embedded both in pride in achievements and trauma over historical grievances, can be interpreted as a defense mechanism that supports a collective identity marked by ambivalence and complexity, and influences the understanding of politics and political culture. Whether Serbs believe that they are truly "heavenly people," participants state that they are not surprised by the survey results, and that they could vouch for the fact that people in their surroundings share such a self-image. What surprised them is that the examinees are all students from the FPS and that they believe indirectly in such an image, yet again, they all agree that if the survey were conducted comparatively among other faculties and universities in the country, the result would probably be similar, i.e., Serbs have dual self-perceptions, and those self-perceptions are politically relevant. The question that remains is how politically relevant and influential they are. On the other hand, participants made interesting observations – the results from the survey (in which Serbs believe they are heavenly people, and the worst one is at the same time, and that they clearly state the rich cultural and historical heritage) do not comply with the internalized logic of colonialism, in which there are people with history and people with mentality. This proves the paradox that inspired this thesis – we hypothesized that Serbs have a dual self-perception, which we defined as "Serbian mentality," asking whether youth in Serbia believe in it and whether it finds it politically relevant. Even when they believe that it exists, results and discussion show that the use of it and its political relevance are at least (also) ambiguous. Participants in the focus group explain this by political actors' decisions to call upon certain stereotypes or historical legacies and events when addressing the nation, or when they have a particular political agenda they want to propagate. In that sense, the greatness of Serbian

[9] Referring to last year's political campaign, "Serbs are not genocidal people," around the United Nations General Assembly voting on installing July 11 as the International Day of Remembrance of the Srebrenica Genocide. DW article: Srbija i Srebrenica:Od glasne tišine do bučne relativizacije – DW – 5. 7. 2025.

(or other nations in the Balkans, depending on which country we are talking about) people is used to achieve a political goal. Short-term effects of such politics may win them the desired results, but in the long term, relying on these stereotypes may prove to be deadly – the break-up of Yugoslavia being the case in point for the ambiguous use of stereotypical narratives. On the other hand, belief in a Serbian inferiority complex may also have political consequences, evident in political apathy, lack of political participation, and maybe even in misunderstandings of what politics is, as discussions from the focus group point out.

Throughout the discussion, participants agreed that a political culture exists in Serbia; however, its nature and quality were subjects of debate. Understanding of political culture is multifaceted and contested, reflecting both historical legacies and contemporary social and political situations. Participants identified political culture as encompassing the collective attitudes, values, and behaviors towards politics within society. Yet, there is ambivalence about whether that culture is progressive or parochial. Students expressed that political culture in Serbia is historically marked by subservience and passivity (which were described as legacies of the Ottoman Empire, throughout this research), hence limiting civic engagement and reflecting apathy toward political participation. On the other hand, when asked what is different between generational understanding of politics and political culture, generally students agreed that "new generations" or Gen Z is different because even though they inherited war trauma from the wars for the Yugoslav legacy, they did not participate in them. More importantly, students see that new generation has a different approach to how they access information. Even though they are mostly served the same national propaganda from the media, as happened during the 1990s, thanks to new outlets and regional cooperations or more nuanced education, they are more media literate and therefore less susceptible to the same propaganda. They will not 'buy' everything politicians serve them. They also locate the issue within the socialist legacy in which everything was made under one-party rule and the cult of the leader, in which new generations do not believe. This belief also has a note of a stereotypical understanding of socialism and the socialist legacy, which is provided by the mainstream media. Participants claim that the new generation has a different understanding of authority and is more willing to challenge it more successfully than older generations.

The focus group discussed the tensions between individual and collective identities within political culture. The conflict between personal agency and societal norms was seen as a defining feature of Serbia's political landscape, where collective narratives (or what being Serb means) often overshadow individual expression (or what else could being a Serb mean besides the entrenched beliefs). One quote from the participant nicely encompasses the entire debate about mentality and political culture: "I generally think that the understanding of mentality - I always see it as some essentialist construct in the discourse, extremely neo-colonial. Now is about some autocolonial discourse or directed towards someone else, it does not even matter, because I think that mentality is usually linked to heritage, but not only in a cultural sense, but also some practices and habits that people in accordance with the geographical area, or in

accordance with a certain political and economic colonization and development of the system, develop some patterns of behavior. When we talk about mentality, I always associate it with something unchangeable, that is linked to genetics, to put it bluntly, and that is why I think it is debatable." To summarize, we colloquially refer to certain behaviors and beliefs as mentality, but do not like it when it is called mentality because it is not scientifically demonstrable, but we observe that people generally believe in it and use it as a shield because of many historical traumas that add fuel to the inferiority complex. The discourse among youth reveals political culture as a contested, evolving construct, and is definitely connected to the belief in a certain "mentality" among their fellow citizens. That mentality encompasses both inherited patterns and emerging aspirations for active participation and political renewal.

Overall, the narrative analysis in the focus group demonstrated that students who participated in the survey and the focus group are aware of the colonial, Balkanist discourse and have confirmed the premise that people, even youth, believe a Serbian mentality exists and is relevant to political developments in the country. Whether the level of "awareness" is the same for all the survey participants, we cannot determine. There were about ten students who showed interest in participating in the focus group. However, only five were able to participate in the end, therefore, we cannot generalize the notion that students are entirely aware of the narratives we explored without conducting research with a larger sample. Nonetheless, during the focus group, we established the connection between Balkanism and Balkan "image" in the 'outside world' and many connotations about the region that are being internalized as a kind of defense mechanism, with a focus on Serbia. However, the discussion about the impact of dual self-perception in Serbia on political culture remains inconclusive, since currently, the general belief is that the current momentum is suitable for changes, and it may be too soon to define political culture, but the influence of *mentality*, whether we like that framing or not, is evident.

Conclusion

When we were reading in class about *Orientalism, Imagining the Balkans*, and *Nesting Orientalism*, I sensed that something was missing from those studies. I could not quite identify what it was, but there was a part that needed further exploration. The portrayal of the Other was clear, with evident essentialization and ambivalence, and the aspect of national identity was addressed within the context of the Balkans. The process of European integration, colloquially called "Europeanization," is clearly depicted as a mechanism of othering and essentialization. How do these mechanisms influence political behavior and political culture in Serbia overall? This thesis aimed to establish a link between those specific beliefs and political behavior in a broad sense, focusing particularly on one regional actor. While observing the political and social developments in the country, we noticed a specific self-perception among the people and a belief that nothing can be changed in the socio-political arena. The general saying is that everything is the same as it was in the 90s, and that we somehow deserve everything that is happening to us. The timing of this thesis is also very particular and contextual because change appears to be happening – and now, people believe in that too. We hypothesized that Serbs have a dual self-perception, and research results confirmed this, even though the concept of mentality may be disputed in a scientific sense, as well as the idea of political culture. This research aimed to explore the complex interaction between perceptions of historical legacies, discourses, identity formation, and political culture. It addresses themes of postcolonial theory, social constructivism, and political behavior within the Serbian context.

The research effectively connects empirical findings with the theoretical framework. Constructivist approach confirms that the negotiations of the Balkan identity/Serbian identity are a key political and cultural process in youth discourse, and that they are socially constructed under the influence of different contexts and factors. One of the most common replies in the focus group highlighted this in a sentence: "that everything depends on the context and who we ask." The fluid and contested definitions of what it means to be Balkan and/or Serbian are shaped by historical, political and cultural context, which reflect the social construction of identity, one of the key concepts in the constructivist approach. Another concept – intersubjectivity and shared meanings is also evident from the research. Meanings about identity or even mentality are shared and maintained within a community. At the same time, the recognition of contrasting self-perceptions demonstrates how collective knowledge and beliefs shape self-understanding and group identity.

The research also identifies Balkanist discourse as a powerful force that frames how youth in Serbia interpret themselves and their socio-political environment. As discourse is a constituent of social reality and plays a role in shaping the identities, interests and behaviors, we can show from these findings that the ways students perceive and reproduce, negotiate, or resist Balkanist stereotypes illustrate the discursive formation of social and political realities. The ambivalence and dual self-perceptions correspond to constructivist views of identity as evolving and often contradictory. The framing used in the focus group by students "national schizophrenia" points to the process of meaning negotiations and struggles over identity typical to the "field of discursivity," where multiple meanings compete all the time. The constructivist approach also highlights the significance of history and legacy in shaping identity. Our findings on the importance of legacies and how people perceive them display how historical narrative and social interactions construct contemporary political culture and self-perceptions. With the emphasis put on, again, who we ask about those legacies and at what time. Finally, our findings demonstrate how material realities are symbolically represented and linguistically framed (to quote again one student – "semantic vicissitudes") framed through the Balkanist discourse influence subjective experiences and identities. In sum, empirical findings illustrate the constructivist premise that identity and political culture, even, emerge from socially constructed, shared, and continuously negotiated meanings embedded, in our case, in Balkanist discourse and internalized logic of colonialism, and confirm that self-perceptions are produced through collective interactions with specific narratives like Balkanism.

When it comes to the reasons for using Postcolonial theory as a framework and theoretical lens, empirical findings conclude its relevance. The findings highlight the internalization and reproduction of colonial logic through Balkanism, the social construction of identity via colonial discourses that reflect uneven power relations, the impact of historical trauma and grievances, as well as ongoing coloniality in political attitudes and behaviors, and the complex and reflexive nature of identity formations influenced by the colonial discourse. These connections reinforce the legitimacy of applying postcolonial theory to the Balkans, even in the paradox situation in which the Balkans were not a classic colony (although that was also a part of the discussion and disagreements in the focus group), emphasizing that the postcolonial condition is not only about formal colonial rule, but rather about the enduring colonial patterns embedded in knowledge, culture and political practices.

Once again, we emphasize that students at FPS are well aware of, and even influenced by, Balkanist discourse, which reflects the internalization of colonial patterns. Colonial domination extends beyond formal colonial rule, and our findings reveal this in conflicting self-perceptions and the acknowledgment of reproducing Orientalist and Balkanist patterns, even among those with higher education, such as FPS students, and through perceptions of Imperial legacies that continue to influence political culture and identity. The self-view of Serbs as both "heavenly people" (superiority complex) and "the worst people" (inferiority complex) mirrors the colonial logic of "people with history" (colonizers) and "people with mentality" (colonized), illustrating

how colonial binary thinking is internalized and perpetuated. This paradoxically conflicts with the idea that binary thinking involves exclusion—saying one cannot simultaneously have history and mentality. The reproduction of Balkanism among Balkan groups extends this paradox, where these groups accept and continue reproducing hierarchical distinctions, confirming postcolonial ideas of "auto-colonization" as described by scholars like Kiossev. This is especially evident in questions that try to locate this "auto-colonization," with students perceiving Serbian politics as auto-colonized but not the society. The relevance of this is immense. Politics being perceived as auto-colonial shows that trust in the political system and institutions is very low; political leaders are believed to be probably completely untrustworthy and negligent of the nation's interests, therefore, since the political leaders are also probably all corrupt and "in somebody else's pocket," there is nobody to replace them. People simply give up and turn to political apathy and non-participation, rationalizing this with sayings such as "They [politicians] are all the same" and "Hush, now, it could be worse," something we observed as part of the *mentality* in our research. Contrary to that, the belief that society is not auto-colonial may paint a different picture, at least in this moment of student and citizen movements and protests. Society is believed to be better, more empathetic to people and the nation's interests, not completely corrupt like politicians, and capable of change. The connotations of this perceived auto-coloniality can be further explored in a new study to determine the more profound political consequences of this phenomenon.

Postcolonial theory also emphasizes the role of discourse in constructing knowledge and maintaining power relations. Findings from the research reveal that students' recognition that media, political rhetoric, and education propagate certain narratives is consistent with Edward Said's notion of Orientalism and its Balkanist adaptation. Stereotypes about Serbian people, such as corruption, victimhood, and exceptionalism, also reflect colonial discursive strategies of "fixity" and "otherness." The political function of these narratives is used to justify political stances such as distrust in institutions and political apathy, aligning with the postcolonial critiques of how colonial discourses perpetuate control. We should also mention the effects of historical and collective trauma that students recognized as a legacy and a mechanism for further political instability in the country and the region. A collective remembrance of historical struggles, victimization, and pride, which serves both as a cause of identity and a psychological defense mechanism, echoes postcolonial concerns. Alongside them, the political apathy and low trust can be interpreted as a consequence of long-standing patterns of domination and cultural marginalization, perpetuated both from within and from outside the region. However, students also observed the reflexivity and contestation in self-perception. They are aware of the narratives but refuse essentialist and deterministic views of Serb identity, believing that at the bottom of the issues Serbia faces is not something Serbia-specific, but that similar struggles were happening and will happen in the rest of the world.

As Gendzel argues, "Almond and Verba have completely omitted history and politics from their construction of political culture" (Gendzel 1997, 229), but here we tried to include

history and politics, or at least the perception of them in the discourse among the youth in Serbia. The impact of historical events, political developments, and past grievances is something that the youth in Serbia are well aware of today. The research results show that young people in Serbia are aware of the narratives on the Balkans that portray the region and its people as "the worst, irreparable, and fatally different," and this bothers them. Students at the FPS describe the Balkans both positively and negatively; they have a strong awareness of media and political narratives influencing perceptions, and they recognize the Balkanist discourse in everyday life. They do believe that Serbian mentality exists, and they do perceive it as influential on politics and political culture. Students describe Serbian identity as complex. They link identity and mentality to political attitudes and behavior. They see political culture as underdeveloped and burdened with various challenges, but mostly locate the root of the problem in the poor state of the political system.

Research findings demonstrate that political culture is a crucial framework for understanding the political importance of beliefs, values, and collective attitudes that shape Serbia's political system and citizen participation. The theory of political culture shows how historical legacies and internalized discourses influence collective attitudes and behaviors, and how they, in turn, affect political behavior and trust in institutions. Results point to a generally negative perception of political culture in Serbia, and describe it as underdeveloped, primitive, authoritarian, corrupt, marked by low political awareness, and mostly as a product of different, contested historical legacies (negative perception of the Ottoman legacy, especially). The focus on political culture as a set of shared orientations, as initially defined by Almond and Verba, combined with historical legacies and socio-political conditions in Serbia, creates a parochial or subject political culture. Students perceive that Byzantine and Ottoman influences as shaping political culture in Serbia even today. The ambivalence towards these legacies highlights the complex and evolving nature of political culture, as something that is also not fixed, but fluid and context-dependent.

The dual self-perceptions linked to "Serbian mentality" and Balkanist discourse intertwine with political culture in Serbia. That influence is also ambiguous. On the one hand, there is a (perceived) subject political culture defined by skepticism, pessimism, and internalized belief that change is unlikely. Political behavior is characterized by apathy, low trust in political actors, and a perception of politicians and politics as detached from the people and their needs. Civic engagement is limited, and political dialogue is nonexistent. This is believed to stem from an inferiority complex side of "Serbian mentality." On the other hand, while protesting and fighting for change and to create a better future, the efforts by the new generation that is leading the movement are perceived as genius, novel, progressive, and politically aware, which often connects to the superiority aspect of "Serbian mentality," say participants, which could be interpreted as potential "breaking up with the notion of "having a mentality" and simply being present and proactive about own present and future. This is specifically evident in a positive shift in political awareness among youth, indicating the emergence of a more participative political

culture in the future, with a better, more nuanced, and more literate approach to education, media, and information. The perception of the new generation as "better" than the former one is connected to a different political system in which they were living. An interesting observation was made that indicated the need for a more stable political system that will be capable of providing a space in which identity and political culture can be negotiated freely. This points to the tension between collective political narratives and individual agency, which highlights that political culture can be both a stabilizing and a potentially transformative force. The ambivalence and contestation over Serbian identity and *mentality* reflect this ongoing negotiation where inherited patterns coexist with an aspiration for political renewal and more active citizenship. To summarize, the research findings substantiate the theory of political culture by showing how historical legacies and internalized discourses shape shared political attitudes, with low trust and participation; self-perceptions linked to Balkanism and "Serbian mentality" are deeply intertwined with political behavior; there is evidence of generational shifts towards greater political awareness and participation, and political culture remains a contested, but evolving and important factor in society. As Lutovac (2025) notes, political culture serves as a mechanism that can contribute to better inclusion, tolerance, and integration of a society, and we should try to understand as best as possible the connections between beliefs, behaviors, and politics. This also means that we can try and come up with ways to measure political culture, if we can measure it at all?

Of course, this research has its limitations. Firstly, the most obvious one is a small and non-representative sample size. The survey included 19 students from the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Belgrade, which is a minimal sample size that cannot be considered statistically representative of all Serbian youth or even all political science students. The focus group participants were self-selected and only came from the same faculty, which limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader population or other social groups, despite the belief that results from other social groups would be similar if studied. The focus on political science students was intentional because their insights can reflect the level of "awareness" among future political scientists and decision-makers. It can also indicate how they perceive the nation as a whole, and whether their perceptions differ from others, given their educational background. For future research, this approach could be quite useful. However, the country's specific socio-political situation, where most students are involved in political and social activism, must be considered. It's reasonable to assume that socio-political instability prevented many students from participating in the research. Another limitation is that the study did not gather detailed demographic information, such as age, level of study, or regional background, which limits a nuanced understanding of the intersectionality of identity, education, and political attitudes. Due to limited resources and the current scope of research, this data was not requested; however, if the study expands, such information would be crucial. Future research should include students from all universities in Serbia and feature a dedicated section on demographics. Generational differences, stereotypes, and beliefs may vary across regions. Currently, this research only suggests possible results, but without a nationwide examination, we cannot definitively state that

the people in Serbia truly believe in Serbian mentality and its influence on politics and behavior. This study is designed to be expanded in future research.

However, the study reveals a connection between Balkanism and Serbia's political culture. Over the past thirty years, the dominant belief among Serbian citizens has been characterized by an internalized colonial mindset. Citizens tend to see themselves as dual, swinging between two extremes, while perceiving the country's politics as 'autocolonized' – with the belief that they lack agency and external, foreign powers control everything. One song comes to mind, by a Serbian pop singer: "Sve je isto samo njega nema" (All is the same, only he is missing — presumably Tito). The song humorously and lightly depicts the country's breakup, the democratization expected afterward, and the self-perceptions of the Yugoslavian peoples. The shared beliefs about ourselves and others have hardly changed. The culture of violence from the 90s persisted into the 21st century and gained new momentum in Serbia. Serbia is not advancing or moving forward in a positive way. But that again depends on who you ask. There isn't, and cannot be, a single answer to that question. Still, there is consensus on what makes us Serbs, Serbs. Apparently, it's about mentality, or inat, as we like to call it when it makes us feel good. Overall, there is something that makes the Balkans Balkan. Or people believe in it. There's a kind of self-essentialization coming from both within the region and from outside. Though the idea of that mentality is highly debated, we weren't trying to prove if it exists. Still, most people believe it does, and that belief is as important — or even more so — than whether it truly exists. Psychology suggests that believing strongly in something can make it real and impactful.

Even with these limitations, the research made several unique contributions. It advances Balkanism studies by focusing on the youth perspective from Serbia, a key area that is often overlooked in favor of regional analysis. It demonstrates that Balkanist discourse functions not only as an external influence but also as an internalized narrative that shapes self-perception and political outlooks. This research also enhances applications of postcolonial theory by emphasizing how colonial logic persists in self-essentializing dualities and auto-colonization within Europe's internal "Other." Additionally, it links discourse theory with political culture to show how deeply rooted historical legacies and their perceptions influence contemporary political practices and youth political awareness. The political culture framework offers insights that connect discursive constructs to concrete political attitudes. This can guide future research and provide valuable data for policymakers and initiatives in education and civic engagement. Recognizing dual and conflicting self-perceptions among youth highlights the need for educational initiatives that encourage critical reflection on historical narratives, internalized stereotypes, and attitudes toward politics.

This research has shown that discourse can be changed, and the way we perceive ourselves can be negotiated, even with diametrically opposing self-perceptions, such as the Serbian one. Nothing in the social and political arena is fixed or set in stone, which is encouraging and can be leveraged to benefit the nation and establish a lasting, stable political system that reflects the will of the people. It is not true that people here are only suited for

authoritarian rule with a strong leader. It is clear that the political culture in Serbia is an evolving and undefined concept. That can also be beneficial, because a definition limits the possibility for action and change, while a fluid concept remains open to progress. The logic of coloniality presupposes a binary perception of people and nations, but here, we demonstrate that one nation can have a long and rich historical legacy and still adhere to a certain mentality as a response to external pressures. Further research can be done into how the Balkanist discourse influences political attitudes and even voter behavior that goes beyond apathy or distrust, as one of the indicators of the level and quality of democracy in the country.

Ultimately, this research highlights the dynamic and contested nature of perceptions of Serbian identity, historical legacy, and political behavior. Research shows the intertwined legacies, internalized Balkanist discourse, and, apparently, the change of generations and generational attitudes towards social and political questions. While deeply rooted narratives of victimhood and exceptionalism, supported by state and other institutional officials in the country, continue to influence political behavior and societal outlooks, an emerging political awareness among youth offers an avenue for transformation. Recognizing that identity and mentality are not fixed but socially constructed and negotiable opens the possibility for crucial reflection and change. It is through this ongoing negotiation between inherited patterns and aspirations for progress that Serbian society can move toward a more participative political culture, not imposed but born out of the nation, breaking free from constraints and internalized colonial binaries.

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