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## Synchronous nationalisms – reading the history of nationalism in South–Eastern Europe between and beyond the binaries

Raul Cârstocea\*

School of History, Politics and International Relations, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester, UK

### ABSTRACT

This article argues that historicising the evolution of nineteenth century nationalisms in South-Eastern Europe allows us to undermine not only binary understandings of nationalism, but also the essentialist reification of a single ideal type as a dominant or exclusive manifestation of nationalism. It draws attention to the competing nationalisms that can be encountered in the area during this period, varying across the spatial and temporal axes, as well as in their espousal by certain groups within the same ‘nation’. The article challenges notions of a temporal lag, constitutive of binary interpretations that identify a fundamental difference between ‘East’ and ‘West’.

### KEYWORDS

Nationalism; imperialism; temporality; South-Eastern Europe; conceptual history

Hans Kohn’s well-known distinction between ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ types of nationalism (Hutchinson & Smith, 1994, p. 162; Kohn, 1944) has demonstrated remarkable staying power as *the* binary structure informing nationalism studies. This is partly explained by the normative implications of the binary, and its association with others – civic / ethnic, liberal / illiberal, inclusive / exclusive, ultimately tantamount to ‘good’ vs. ‘bad’. As Maria Todorova warns, despite intense academic criticism (for an overview see e.g. Shulman, 2002, pp. 555–562), it ‘persists not only in political and journalistic parlance, but also in academic writings’, as ‘most of the classical texts on nationalism have perpetuated this dichotomy’ (Todorova, 2015, p. 682). A corollary of the binary, no less important both to its internal structure and political implications, is the notion of ‘lateness’ with respect to the development of other, non-Western European nationalisms. This is in line with the fact that the ‘Eastern’ type is much more vaguely defined in Kohn’s text, with ‘Western nationalism’ being contrasted rather with ‘nationalism outside the Western world’ (Jaskułowski, 2010, p. 294), in a formulation reminiscent of Stuart Hall’s (1992) ‘the West and the Rest’. Finally, and perhaps even more broadly applicable, the dichotomy can be said to have imprinted the binary as a pervasive *form* of conceptualising nationalism, even when the cruder geographical connotations are removed.

This article argues that historicising the evolution of nineteenth century nationalisms in South-Eastern Europe allows us to undermine not only binary understandings of

**CONTACT** Raul Cârstocea  raul.carstocea@mu.ie

\*Present address: Department of History, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland.

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nationalism, but also the essentialist reification that can contemplate a single ideal type as a dominant or even exclusive manifestation of nationalism in a given territory. It does so by drawing attention to the numerous competing nationalisms that can be encountered in the area of South-Eastern Europe during the period under consideration, varying across both the spatial and temporal axes, as well as in their espousal by certain groups within the same 'nation', while running against their limits with groups that do not neatly fall within a single – or indeed any – national category (e.g. Bjork, 2008; Judson, 2006; Van Gin-derachter & Fox, 2019; Zahra, 2010). Since an idea of 'the West' is central to these debates, I engage with the different interpretations of the concept by nationalists of diverse kinds, as well as with its functioning as a push and pull factor in the history of nationalism. In doing so, I focus rather on the *relationship* between nationalisms in nineteenth century South-Eastern Europe and the Western models that served as their constant points of reference. Accepting also Hall's (1992, p. 186) premise that "the West' is a *historical*, not a geographical construct', I argue that even the most schematic attempt at historicising the evolutions of – multiple, entangled, shifting – nationalisms falling between or cutting across the aforementioned binaries nuances to the point of challenging their existence.

The timeframe employed is derived from the identification of a 'second *Sattelzeit*' affecting all of Europe, but 'particularly visible in the regions outside the traditional Western European 'core' territories, such as France or England' (Mishkova, Trencsényi, & Jalava, 2014, pp. 3–6). Such a notion revises earlier interpretations of this paradigm shift as occurring in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe only during the interwar period, drawing attention to *longue durée* processes and the roots of interwar radicalism in the entangled conceptualisations of 'the national' and 'modernity' starting with the second half of the nineteenth century. As can already be intimated from the above, this article is thus informed by a Koselleckian approach that pays attention to both conceptual meanings and temporal registers, as well as to the overlap of the latter in the ever-shifting content of the former (Koselleck, 2004). A preoccupation with temporalities is thus key to my interpretation, which follows the centrality of a specific temporal vision to the European and European-driven project of modernisation. Its unfolding according to a linear, progressive idea of 'development' and a categorical orientation toward the future (Osborne, 1995) valorising the 'horizon of expectation' over the 'space of experience' (Koselleck, 2004) is widely acknowledged, as is the process of standardisation that accompanied it, including the establishment of a universal time regime (Ogle, 2015). One of the consequences of the diffusion of clock and calendar time was a synchronicity that Benedict Anderson (1983) saw as central to the emergence of nationalism, and Sebastian Conrad (2017, p. 9) to the 'globalization of the imagination', and that, in combination with the progressive narrative, led to a conceptualisation of difference as developmental lack and temporal lag (Fabian, 1983).

My article thus seeks to tackle directly these notions of a temporal lag, constitutive of binary interpretations that identify a fundamental (structural or substantial) difference between 'East' and 'West'. Instead, by adopting a long-term framework of reference that examines the evolution of South-East European nationalisms in time, across the long nineteenth century, they decisively point to the conceptual and cultural synchronicity of Eastern and Western Europe. Reminiscent of Reinhart Koselleck's notion of the 'contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous' (Koselleck, 2004, p. 90), and also noted by Maria Todorova, 'the relative synchronicity of eastern and western Europe within a

*longue durée* framework' is a very important methodological consideration insofar as it 'circumvents the trap of origins, which carries backwardness as its corollary' (Todorova, 2005, p. 147). As such, and heeding Todorova's call to broaden both the spatial and the temporal frameworks of reference, I argue for a relative synchronicity of eastern and western Europe in which civic and ethnic imaginings of the nation overlapped in varying proportions, while being underwritten by global structural transformations that fundamentally altered the conditions of modernity (see e.g. Osterhammel, 2014). The image that emerges from such a perspective is certainly not that of a binary, not even of a continuum (which would necessarily involve some extremes, at least as ideal types), but rather of nationalism as a palimpsest, a script continuously modified, added to, and even re-written, with its overlapping layers replacing an 'original' rendered invisible by its many transformations.

Following the line of interpretation put forth by Mishkova and Daskalov (2014) and also the temporal-conceptual framework briefly prefigured above, it appears useful to distinguish two *phases* or periods in the evolution of nationalisms in nineteenth century South-Eastern Europe. This allows both observing certain shifts in the area actors' permanent re-negotiations of their position toward and relationship with the Western European 'models', and semantic changes undertaken by such heavily-laden and ambiguous concepts as 'nationalism' over time. An important qualification is though that such periods should not be seen as neatly distinct or mutually exclusive, but rather as layered temporal structures, *Zeitschichten* (Koselleck, 2000), where the *prevalence* of one or another conceptual meaning coexists with its persistent interpretations derived from past experience and future-oriented visions indicative of a changing horizon of expectation. The article is consequently structured in three parts, each of them corresponding to one of the major lines of argumentation I propose in an attempt to subvert the binaries employed in the study of (South-)East European nationalism and their attendant temporal dimension centred on 'lag'. The first of these tackles the initial phase of national movements in the region, corresponding roughly to the first half of the nineteenth century, and its focus is mostly on the pervasive *topos* of 'transfer', which I seek to nuance. The second addresses directly another important binary that the present article aims to subvert, between 'nation' and 'empire', challenging their exclusive dichotomy to read them instead as coexisting and overlapping forms of statal organisation, and emphasising their conceptual imbrication. This discussion provides an entry point into the third section, which briefly discusses the contestations of the Western model of liberal nationalism in the second half of the nineteenth century, at a time of state-formation and consolidation in South-Eastern Europe. The conceptual thread traversing the three sections is that of an emphasis on the synchronicity of 'East' and 'West', viewed in the light of broader global structural transformations and against a background of uneven development and asymmetric power relations.

With the self-evident caveat that such an attempt, with its very broad spatial and temporal frames of reference, can by necessity only be schematic in the scope of a short paper, my attempt in the following pages will be to outline this conceptual engagement according to some of its salient features. While aware of the pitfalls of an attempt to nuance theoretical readings of nationalism by recourse to empirical evidence which of necessity will have to be sketchy and rather broad-brush, there are also advantages to such a 'meso' level of analysis, which Maria Todorova (2010, p. 175) appositely compared

to 'the beauty of the airplane view'. Moreover, I believe that even such a cursory reading can help undermine the established binary understandings of nationalism by exploring the tensions and permanent renegotiations of local conditions with a Western historiographical canon (Liakos, 2013). At the very least, it could serve as an outline of a research agenda, partly already under way, not only meant, in Pieter Judson's words, to 'de-pathologize' Eastern Europe, but also to explore some of the features of the 'core' that a peripheral lens allows us to observe, as well as the more dynamic and two-way relationship between the two that such a perspective reveals. The article thus engages with the extensive body of literature on 'Balkanism' following Maria Todorova's codification of the concept (for recent useful overviews adopting a historicised perspective see Foster, 2021, pp. 2–5; Mishkova, 2018, pp. 211–226), and is particularly inspired by Mishkova's (2018, p. 3) proposition to devote more attention to local actors, reversing the perspective and looking 'at the Balkans primarily inside-out, from within the Balkans towards its 'self' and the outside world, where the west is an important but not the sole referent'. However, whereas Mishkova is primarily concerned with the spatial coordinates of the 'Balkans', cultural geography, and the scholarly politics of region-making, as the subtitle of her book suggests, my focus here is primarily on time and the temporal imaginations of state- and nation-building elites in South-Eastern Europe.

Narrowing down the focus to South-Eastern Europe is partly justified by such pragmatic constraints, and partly by the significant differences – having to do with periodization, ideological content, and patterns of mobilisation – between nationalisms in the area from those in Central Europe, for example, which render the idea of a common 'Eastern' space of nationalism untenable. Given their entanglement with imperial polities in the region – hinting to another important binary, of 'nation' and 'empire', that the present article aims to subvert –, a more productive internal differentiation of nationalisms in the area for the period in question appears to be by association with the Habsburg, Ottoman, and Romanov empires and their respective spheres of influence. Beyond the obvious differences between these imperial polities in terms of internal organisation and administration, power capabilities, and cultural make-up, the different pace of modernisation and reform across the long nineteenth century produced different opportunity structures for social mobilisation, national or otherwise. Consequently, South-Eastern Europe in this article refers to the area (formerly) ruled, directly or indirectly, by the Ottoman Empire, thus including the autonomous principalities of Wallachia and Moldova, later making up Romania. In doing so, it follows Todorova's (2018, p. 73) notion of historical legacy and her assertion that 'in the narrow sense of the word, then, one can argue that the Balkans are, in fact, the Ottoman legacy'. Furthermore, the pervasive association of the area with violence, virulent nationalism, exclusion, and mass atrocities (Rodogno, 2012) – lamented by specialists in 'the Balkans' and 'balkanism' from its inception until today (Mishkova, 2018; Todorova, 1997) and recently debunked convincingly by Siniša Malešević (2012a; 2012b; 2019, pp. 160–187) – renders it into a quintessential model, as the 'most Eastern' of the 'Eastern' nationalisms. A final caveat is that even within such an arguably more consistent unit of analysis, the diversity of nationalisms between different countries and social groups during this period was itself significant, and this diversity will only be hinted at occasionally, but not elaborated in much detail. To provide further consistency, however, I will focus primarily on the cases of nationalism encountered in the South-East European countries that achieved

independence prior to the First World War, as nation-building elites in these countries had different opportunity structures than nationalist activists in imperial provinces such as Bosnia and Herzegovina or Macedonia, both in terms of access to state resources and the resulting capacity to implement their designs in the form of policy.

## A history of transfers

The history of nationalisms in South-Eastern Europe begins invariably as a history of transfers. Rather than rooted in the discovery of some autochthonous ‘nationality’ in areas that were as a rule – with few if any exceptions – multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-confessional, the roots of both quests for independence and parallel or subsequent attempts at nation-building can be found in the local elites’ fascination with Western European modernity. The rupture introduced in the fabric of time by the ideas and ideals of the French Revolution, as well as the newly established notion of History, complete with its decisive orientation toward a secular future imagined as both unknown and desired and the corresponding decline of the space of experience (Koselleck, 2004, pp. 39–41), prompted attempts to align what were peripheral imperial spaces with the triumphant march of European historical progress. The first form taken by these attempts was initially the adoption of Western models, of which none was more important than ‘the nation’ and the accompanying nation-building institutions: modern bureaucracies, armies, national school systems and cultural institutions, all underpinned by legislation imported from ‘the West’ (Mishkova & Daskalov, 2014, p. 3).

It is thus important to note that the very emergence of nationalism in South-Eastern Europe was indelibly marked by a simultaneous desire to ‘Europeanize’, to become part of a Western civilisation that came to be synonymous with ‘civilisation’ as such, and of which the French model was at this stage the dominant one. Such an alignment could be alternatively pragmatic, as a way to demonstrate ‘modernity’ in order to gain the favour of the European Great Powers in the quest for independence from Eastern empires, and idealistic, prompted by a genuine attempt to modernise societies that were self-identified as ‘backward’. One of the architects of the Romanian nation-state, Mihail Kogălniceanu, clearly expressed the first view when stating: ‘Europe gives its sympathies to and supports only countries that aspire to align their institutions with those of the civilized world. [...] To show Europe our desire to Europeanize our country will be to attract the sympathies and support of the Great Powers and of foreign public opinion’ (cited in Verdery, 1991, p. 35). Polish intellectual Aleksander Świątochowski could reciprocate in 1883 by urging his compatriots ‘to join in the stream of general civilization, to adapt ourselves to it, to subject our life to the same rhythms which govern the development of other nations. Otherwise, they will never recognize our rights and our needs, and will continue to regard us as if we were some *ancient relic which can be comprehensible only with the help of an archeological dictionary*’ (cited in Liakos, 2013, p. 322, emphasis in the original).

The pervasive metaphor of Eastern ‘backwardness’ thus has its origin in this initial ‘moment’ of nationalism in South-Eastern Europe, indebted already to the ‘asymmetric counter-concepts of east and west’ (Mishkova, 2018, p. 4). In its constitution, it is doubly indicative of the permanent reference to Western Europe, in relationship with which the national movements in the region constantly defined themselves, and of the

accompanying temporal register, itself indebted to the then-prevailing Western vision of progress that posited a notion of evolutionary stages in humanity's development, with 'the West' itself at its apex (Fabian, 1983). The resulting vision of time, albeit informed by an East–West dichotomy whereby the Eastern empires stood for delay and backwardness and 'the West' for acceleration and progress, was nonetheless thoroughly aligned with the similar dichotomy Western modernising elites saw with regards to the *ancien régime*, without however the overlapping spatial axis of distinction. Moreover, this transnational reading of nationalisms in South-Eastern Europe immediately invokes their 'civic' origins. If we follow Brubaker's classic account of the distinction between the French and German models of citizenship, associated with different processes of nation-state formation whereby in France the state institutionalisation of citizenship preceded notions of an ethnocultural nation and the opposite was the case in Germany (Brubaker, 1992, pp. 52–56), the former is certainly more often encountered among the early South-East European nation-states, from Greece to Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, or Montenegro. Unsurprisingly in spaces where a national bourgeoisie (and the accompanying 'civil society') was yet to emerge (Sugar, 1995), South-East European nationalisms developed first as top-down state nationalising projects (Malešević, 2017; 2019, pp. 169–170), emulating a French model that was starting to be challenged at the same time of its adoption in South-Eastern Europe.

However, lest we succumb to 'botanical metaphors' of Western models being 'transplanted on alien soil' (Todorova, 2005, p. 154), it is important to note that the path of such transfers was by no means straightforward – with East European elites studying in 'the West' and directly adopting Western models as a consequence – but involved a variety of local actors and of lateral transfers between them. 'Transfer' in this context appears as a much more complex process, including 'intraregional and transregional' routes (Mishkova, Trencsényi, & Jalava, 2014, p. 6), some of which bypassed 'the West' or at least mediated its influence, more akin to a metaphor of 'circulation' than one of 'import', 'copying', or 'pirating' of the modular nation (Anderson, 1983, p. 81). For example, it was the Russian occupation of the Romanian principalities in the early nineteenth century that led to the adoption of Western, and especially French, culture, as well as to the implementation of the first proto-constitutional legal arrangements (Mishkova & Daskalov, 2014, p. 1). Similarly, the Romanian principalities acted as a 'hub of neo-Byzantine and Hellenic culture' and 'a territorial base for the Greek national struggle, sheltered [...] from direct Ottoman interference. From this perspective, the rise of the Romanian national movement cannot be understood without considering the role Hellenic scholars played in spreading the values of the Enlightenment and in elaborating the first notions of national identity, fatherland and patriotism' (Iordachi, 2013, p. 72). A similar situation prevailed in Bulgaria, where Greek enlighteners acted as the main vectors of modernity and Western transfers after the establishment of independent Greece (Daskalov, 2013) and where Russian pan-Slavism also played a major role in the evolution of Bulgarian nationalism. The latter in turn helped 'consolidate the self-confident national identity of the Russians as powerful defenders of threatened Christianity and Slavdom', turning into a superiority complex that would lead them to 'eventually accuse the Bulgarians of 'ingratitude' and finally 'abandon' them when the Bulgarian principality embarked on independent foreign policy' (Vovchenko, 2011, pp. 265, 269). In turn, as both Constantin Iordachi and Roumen Daskalov point out, the perceived threat of Hellenization (where

Greeks were both associated with the Ottoman imperial elite and viewed as competitors in the struggle for political pre-eminence) was a common trope in the national discourses of modern Romania and Bulgaria, translating into long-standing anti-Greek xenophobia in both countries. This example of the complex entanglements of Russian, Greek, Bulgarian, and Romanian nationalisms in a fairly limited context and timeframe highlights the fluidity of the interactions between multiple nationalisms in the area of South-Eastern Europe, ranging from cooperation on a common anti-imperial and pro-Western agenda to competition, conflict, and the development of 'nesting' or 'lateral' Orientalisms (Bakić-Hayden, 1995; Sorescu, 2018a; 2021).

Moreover, this example emphasises not only the entanglement and eminently transnational character of nationalisms in the region, but also the relative *simultaneity* of national movements in South-Eastern Europe with their counterparts in Western, Northern, or Southern Europe, as well as the 'Creole pioneers' in South America (Anderson, 1983), allowing perhaps for the exceptions of Britain and France. However, viewed in this light, the latter appear just as that, i.e. as exceptions to be accounted for, rather than a 'normal' path of development in comparison to which all others would appear deviant (see Chiro, 1989; Todorova, 2005, p. 146). The First Serbian Uprising, which Wilson (1970, p. 28) identified as 'the first of the great nationalistic movements of the nineteenth century', started in the same year of Haiti's independence. Meanwhile, Greece was recognised as an independent state in the London Protocol of 1830, at the same time as a Belgium whose 1831 constitution would subsequently become the most prominent model in South-East Europe (Cârstocea & Van Ginderachter, forthcoming; Lagasse, 2008; Pippidi, 2010, p. 125), and thus antedating by a generation the independence of Italy or Germany. Consequently, rather than associating transfers with 'backwardness' and temporal lag, we could argue, with Conrad (2017, p. 4), that 'the history of transfers must itself be embedded in larger political and social contexts. Frequently, connections are above all an indicator that historical actors experienced similar challenges, and responded to them in related ways. The 'global,' then, needs to be located less in the transfers and cultural interactions than in the conditions and power structures that made these transfers possible in the first place'.

Empirical evidence shows that local actors were indeed aware of the conditions and power structures entailed by such transfers and were anything but passive recipients in these processes. As Alex Tipei (2018, p. 648) shows with respect to the case of the French influence in elementary education in the early nineteenth century Balkans, reformers of the public education systems in South-Eastern Europe saw such transfers as 'an opportunity to pursue their own goals'. Their acknowledgment of the 'superiority and centrality' (Tipei, 2018, p. 648) of the *Société pour l'instruction élémentaire* (SIE) in primary education came at the price of acquiring the vital resources (financial and technical) they lacked in order to implement such programmes, which they viewed as essential to modernising, civilising, and nationalising their populations. 'In other words, they permitted the SIE to transform them into a periphery' and 'expressly and tacitly acquiesced to this unequal relationship not out of reverence for the French organization, but because they could use it for their own advantage' (Tipei, 2018, pp. 648–649).

It is also important to note, as Siniša Malešević shows, that the independence movements in Greece or Serbia were hardly 'national' and the Balkan armed insurrections of the early nineteenth century (in Serbia, Greece, Wallachia, or Crete) were 'chaotic,



highly contingent events comprising elements of social discontent, fear, opportunism and necessity where nationalist principles were virtually nonexistent' (Malešević, 2012a, p. 48). A closer look at the participants in these rebellions reveals Gellner's (1997, p. 42) 'ideological bandits: in other words nationalists' to be a motley crew of 'units composed of banditry (hajduks, armatoloi, klephts and pirates), foreign trained volunteers (ex-officers and soldiers of the Habsburg, Russian, French and British militaries) and local notables many of which had little or no military experience' (Malešević, 2012b, pp. 309–310). These bandits were only turned into national symbols and became part of a national canon much later, after the consolidation of the states and, importantly, after they had disappeared as a social phenomenon (Bracewell, 2003). The leaders of the two Serbian uprisings, Đorđe Petrović-Karađorđe and Miloš Obrenović, the 'founding fathers' of the two dynasties that later competed for power in independent Serbia, were illiterate 'opportunity traders who quickly realized that the social frustrations of local peasantry could be channelled in a direction that would benefit their personal influence and ultimately help their ambition to establish a monopoly on pork trade with the Habsburg Empire' (Malešević, 2019, p. 177). As such, these insurrections were rather 'mostly social rebellions focused on local concerns that eventually tapped into the broader geopolitical transformations of the region' (Malešević, 2018, p. 162). However, rather than reading this aspect as a 'Balkan' feature indicative of backwardness, it might be viewed instead as pointing toward the other mobilising factors for what were *subsequently* coded as nationalist movements: no one would contest the importance of socio-economic considerations in the French Revolution, nor of slavery in Haiti, for example.

Consequently, a more fruitful way of taking stock of these entanglements of the social, the national, and the geopolitical than the artificial excising of 'nationalism' from this nexus appears to be a line of interpretation inspired by what Holly Case (2018) has recently called 'the age of questions'. The nineteenth century witnessed indeed the proliferation of such 'questions', as 'structuring ideas about society, politics, and states [...] influencing the range of actions considered possible and desirable', with the additional insight that such questions were at once 'highly contentious and competitive' and raised simultaneously, or 'bundled together' (Case, 2018, pp. xv, 4, 6). Viewed in this light, in an age ruled by the concept of 'emancipation' (Case, 2018, p. 72), the 'national question' dovetailed with the 'social question' (and many others), and, in South-Eastern Europe, both were embedded within the broader 'Eastern Question'. The latter was in turn an international aggregate identified by Fyodor Dostoevsky as *the* formula that comprised, 'perhaps unknowingly to itself, all other political questions, perplexities and prejudices of Europe' (cited in Case, 2016, p. 772). And if nationalism eventually came to be the dominant framework for pushing forward this emancipatory agenda, this had to do, at least in South-Eastern Europe, with the aforementioned quest for *international recognition* of belonging to a European international order. As Andrei Sorescu argues, 'Romanian nation- and state-builders became scholars of international relations' through this process, by learning to argue their case for independence in the language of *jus publicum Europeum* (Sorescu, 2018a, p. 63). Consequently, 'beyond the obvious statement that the international qua geopolitics influenced the trajectory of nationalism, we equally need to accept that the conceptual nuts and bolts of nationalism depended, at times, on international law' (Sorescu, 2018a, p. 87). Thus, one could argue that it was the more pronounced international *legibility* and the increasing international *legitimacy* of

nationalism and the 'national question', rather than its intrinsic salience, that eventually rendered it dominant. Instead of a story of West to East transfer, this could perhaps be interpreted more fruitfully as a process of global structural transformation – affecting the core and periphery alike – whereby the nation gradually became more *normative* (Cârstocea, 2020; Osterhammel, 2013) in the course of the nineteenth century, at least in Europe.

### The imperial imagination

Engaging the relationship between nation-building and processes of state formation and consolidation, a historicisation of nationalisms in South-Eastern Europe has to take stock of the coexistence and competition between nation-states and empires in the course of the nineteenth century, as well as of the problematic nature of this very dichotomy in a context of 'nationalizing empires' (Miller & Berger, 2015) meeting 'imperializing nation-states' (Malešević, 2018, pp. 166–168). First off, the Western nations that East European nationalisms sought to emulate were themselves empires, and the discrepancy between 'active' and 'passive' citizens in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen acted as a limit – colonial and gendered – to its alleged universality. As such, processes of national homogenisation in the metropolis ran parallel to the colonial hierarchisation of subject populations predicated on notions of civilizational superiority, with liberalism equally informing both (see e.g. Pitts, 2009). Second, the Eastern land empires were themselves engaged in nationalising projects at this time, from the nation-building efforts in the Romanov Empire after the Crimean War (Moon, 1996), through the separate paths taken by the Austrian and Hungarian parts of the Dual Monarchy after the 1867 *Ausgleich*, to the 'messy process of experimentation aimed at holding together, and indeed nationalizing, the far-flung [Ottoman] empire' (Eissenstat, 2015, p. 429). The German project of unification, undoubtedly national and even paradigmatic for the civic–ethnic binary, was undertaken under the aegis of empire, subsuming both the imagined medieval past of the Holy Roman Empire and expansionist future plans directed both toward Africa and Oceania and Eastern Europe (Berger, 2015; Conrad & Osterhammel, 2004; Nelson, 2009). Third, in addition to the complex spatial relationship between nationalising metropolises and colonial possessions and its legal intricacies, 'whether we think of sea-based empires in the west or contiguous empires in Central and Eastern Europe, imperial imaginations had been vital for state formation and continued to be the dominant imaginations during the nineteenth century' (Berger & Miller, 2015, p. 2).

The imperial framework was thus both a contrasting model and an integral part of the nationalist imaginaries in South-Eastern Europe. One of its manifestations can be encountered in the territorial expansionist fantasies of a Greater Bulgaria (*Velika i Obedinena Bulgariia*), Greater Serbia (as with the *Načertanije* programme of 1844, which later clashed with the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Habsburg Empire), Greater Romania (*România Mare*), Greater Albania (*Shqipëria Etnike*), or the *Megáli* idea in Greece (Hajdarpašić, 2015; Malešević, 2018). According to the familiar tendency of nationalism to retroject a putative 'unbroken continuity' into the past and draw legitimacy from it, such imperial imaginations drew also on the pre-Ottoman imperial 'legacies' of the tsars Simeon the Great in Bulgaria or Stefan Uroš IV Dušan in Serbia (Malešević, 2018, pp. 157–

166). Beyond the territorial dimension and the aspirations of regional hegemony, the logic of empire also translated into practices of (extractive) internal colonialism (Chirot, 1976; Marin, 2018; 2019) and (settler) internal colonisation (Iordachi, 2002) carried out by the newly independent nation-states in South-East Europe, combining an ethnic with a social dimension. Drawing also on the distinction between the two made by Moses (2010, p. 23), internal colonialism entailed the ‘colonial exploitation of the resources of a territory without making any improvements or without any attempt at sustainability’, leading to what contemporary Austrian and German observers in Romania called *Raubwirtschaft*, or ‘plunder economy’ (Marin, 2018, p. 59). Meanwhile, internal colonisation translated into settlement projects, especially in border areas, of the type described in detail by Iordachi (2002) for the province of Dobrogea, aimed at modifying the ethnic composition with a view to reducing its diversity and producing a homogenous ‘national’ population. At the same time, it is important to note that colonial practices were at work also in the metropolitan contexts of saltwater empires, as evident in the use of the terms *colonie* and *colon* for institutions as diverse as penal colonies – be they metropolitan or overseas –, orphanages, state institutions for paupers, or agricultural colonies of education (Stoler & McGranahan, 2007). In his seminal *Peasants into Frenchmen*, Eugen Weber took this one step further, seeing the very process of nationalising a France created by ‘conquest and colonization’ as akin in many respects to overseas expansion, and ‘the famous hexagon [...] itself [...] as a colonial empire shaped over the centuries’ (Weber, 1976, pp. 493, 485).

Along these lines, the simultaneous and entangled attempts at nationalisation and colonisation, both domestic and overseas, can be read as defined by the tension between the opposing tractions of processes of *homogenisation* and *hierarchisation*, inextricably linked to the European colonial project and the imperial archive it produced. Such regional hierarchies could be visible for example in the taxonomies of the Serbian geographer and ethnologist Jovan Cvijić – ‘hardly surprisingly’ with the Serbs at the top –, the ‘racial history’ of the Balkans of Slovenian anthropologist Niko Župančič (naturally substituting the South Slavs for the Serbs), or in Vasile Pârvan’s notion that the ‘Daco-Romanians’ were the oldest population in the region and ‘the keystone of the Mediterranean culture in South-East Europe’ (Mishkova, 2018, pp. 51–62). These opposing tractions could also be visible in the political and legal treatment of the same group, as in the case of the Jews, their ambiguous position ‘oscillating between that of the prime candidates for assimilation to their radical exclusion on the basis of categories as rigid as those employed to identify ‘racial difference’” (Cârstocea & Kovács, 2019, p. 34). Most importantly, as already mentioned above, such considerations were never fully – and arguably not even primarily – based on ethnic grounds, but rather located at the intersection of class, ethnicity, language, and religion, with a pervasive gender bias underscoring all these categories.

Thus, examining the extent to which ‘core’ nations were simultaneously empires while ‘peripheral’ nationalisms seeking independence from empires sometimes presented imperial ambitions of their own, inspired by the very form of statehood they were rebelling against, helps us undermine yet another prevailing binary in nationalism studies, the one distinguishing between ‘nation’ and ‘empire’. Problematising this distinction is useful for remembering that all nationalisms engaged with ‘empire’ in one way or another, and, moreover, that this engagement often had a transnational dimension (Todorova, 2015, pp. 683–684). As Burbank and Cooper (2010, p. 9) have noted, ‘there was and is no

single path from empire to nation – or the other way around [...] and both empires and nation-states could be transformed into something more like the other'. If the nation-state eventually prevailed as a political form over empire, this was a later development, and arguing about imperial 'decline' during the nineteenth century (a pervasive *topos* at least in the literature dealing with the 'Eastern' empires) entails a teleological retrojection that blinds us to the extent to which 'the nineteenth century was much more an age of empire than [...] of nations and nation-states' (Osterhammel, 2014, p. 392). As such, instead of focusing exclusively on the competition between nations and empires, both in historical cases and as concepts, a more fruitful path of enquiry would be to see them as a hybrid and combined model, defined by the tensions engendered by its opposing tractions, as well as to see the two as mutually reinforcing contexts. As Berger and Miller also conclude the introduction to their study of 'nationalizing empires', it is important to note that 'nation-building cannot be understood without its imperial context – this is true for secessionist nation-building projects in imperial peripheries, but also for the nation-building processes in imperial cores' and that 'nation building and empire were very much entangled processes' (Berger & Miller, 2015, p. 30).

Underwriting both 'nation' and 'empire' were the aforementioned global transformations taking place in the course of the nineteenth century, where Western Europe occupies indeed a special position, accounting for its being a point of reference, not just in South-Eastern Europe but globally. The global penetration of capitalism, the technological revolution in media, travel and communication, neatly conceptualised in the 'print capitalism' on which Benedict Anderson (1983) places so much importance, and the processes of standardisation that the former two set in motion, essential to Gellner's (1983) account of the rise of nationalism, affected nations and empires alike (Conrad, 2017; Osterhammel, 2013). Standardisation and centralisation were characteristic during this period not just of 'modern' nation-states but also of (allegedly 'backward', 'Eastern') empires, as Pieter Judson's (2016) history from below of the Habsburg Empire shows. As such, the processes of standardisation and codification that Gellner identified as essential to modern nationalism appear more pertinently understood along the lines of James C. Scott's (1998) account of modern *states* and their attempts to render their populations 'legible'. In multi-linguistic, multi-confessional and multi-ethnic polities such as the ones in (South-)Eastern Europe, the terms of such classification, in all their arbitrariness, became crucial political factors in determining the boundaries of future 'nationalities', themselves staking a claim to their own nation-states (Stergar & Scheer, 2018). Empires could also inadvertently promote nationalism by homogenising and coding various types of social, 'anti-state discontent as a form of nationalist rebellion' (Malešević, 2021, p. 2). This privileging of the state over the nation appears all the more legitimate for South-Eastern Europe, insofar as the nation-building processes in the region proceeded mostly as elite-driven, top-down processes aimed first and foremost at state consolidation, with nationalism appearing as a belated (Roudometof, 2001), weak (Todorova, 2015), and marginal (Malešević, 2012a; 2012b; 2019) ideology that in most cases developed after independence. This interpretation can serve also as a useful corrective to Ernest Gellner's paradigm of the rise of nationalism as a result of industrialisation – more suitable for and indeed probably inspired by first-hand experience of the case of Central Europe and nationalisms in the Habsburg Empire (Cohen & Hall, 2017) than for the agrarian societies of South-Eastern Europe. Read along these lines, it was the state

processes of standardisation and classification that produced 'ethnicity', a category that only became more salient than (all) others following its legal codification at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 (Cârstocea, 2020).

### Nationalism revisited – alternative paths to development

With a view to the temporal structure prefigured earlier, the period between the second half of the nineteenth century (and more visibly after 1878 in South-Eastern Europe) and the First World War can be heuristically distinguished from the preceding one. The earlier adoption or mimesis of national-imperial 'forms' derived from Western models started to be increasingly criticised during this period. The most important criticism was related to a growing perception that the foreign institutional imports did not seem to be working properly in their (South-)Eastern European settings. As Mishkova and Daskalov (2014, p. 19) put it:

the state and legal institutions borrowed from the industrializing West were imposed upon agrarian societies with weak urban ('bourgeois') strata, which inevitably brought them in dissonance with the local economic and social foundations. Furthermore, the needs of state-building (such as administration, army and diplomatic service) expanded much faster than the Balkan societies' economic capacities.

This led to an ever-more visible discrepancy between expectations and actuality, between formal legal structures and a social reality that seemed to defy them, frustrating modernisers in their attempts to accelerate progress and align their countries with the developed 'West'.

The criticism of such formal institutional imports and adaptations to the conceptual apparatus of 'the West' got its most popular formulation from one of the Romanian state-builders, literary critic and conservative politician Titu Maiorescu, as 'forms without substance' (Maiorescu, 1868). The critique was also a call for a response to the problem, which took multiple forms, varying with the political orientation of their proponents, ranging from Marxism and left-wing socialist-inspired forms of agrarian populism to right-wing conservative celebrations of 'tradition' and 'authenticity' (Trencsényi, 2014; Trencsényi & Kopeček, 2007; Trencsényi et al., 2016, pp. 277–608). What they shared was a common orientation to identifying distinct paths to modernity, alternative developmental models that sought to *adapt*, not yet reject, the Western modernising impetus to what were (correctly) identified as different social realities.

It was during this phase that alternative models became prominent in South-Eastern Europe, from the non-liberal German one – which had been previously perceived mostly with suspicion due to Germany's imperialist aspirations toward the area – to more 'local' historical legacies. Of these, the previously devalued Byzantine Empire – associated with Eastern 'backwardness' and 'despotism' – was reconsidered as an integral part of the European heritage and an alternative route for South-Eastern Europe's belonging to it (Iorga, 1935; Ignjatović, 2014; Mishkova, 2018, pp. 41–69). A revaluation of 'the peasant' as the authentic representative of national culture, opposed to an alienated civilisation of the cities that was seen as too imitative of foreign models, became a pervasive *topos* of public discourse. This was partly compensating symbolically for the still unanswered 'social question', the failure of reforms to redress the economic situation of the peasantry, making up the majority of the population at the turn of the century throughout

the region, and partly ‘answering’ ubiquitous concerns about the absence of a capitalist entrepreneurial class (Sorescu, 2019; 2021). As such, the locus of difference was related less to the presence of (nationalist) ideology than it was to the presence of absence in the realm of the social (i.e. an absent bourgeoisie).

All of these adaptations entailed also a radically changed temporal horizon: while previously, in line with progressive visions of Western modernity, the past had been devalued at the expense of a promising future to the acceleration of which all efforts to modernise were directed, it was suddenly rediscovered and revalued as ‘authentic’ – and ‘national’. As with the example of the Byzantine Empire mentioned above, this shift involved both a re-fashioned and more nuanced form of belonging to the European space, and an inversion of the dynamic of modernity whereby in Eastern Europe ‘the past was often perceived to be better than the present, while the future seemed to be rather opaque’ (Mishkova, Trencsényi, & Jalava, 2014, p. 11). This aspect immediately brings to light the aforementioned coexistence of different temporal registers and conceptual meanings associated with nationalism: the redefined positioning of South-Eastern Europe on alternative paths to modernity contained and combined both earlier conceptions of progress and the determined reaction against them. It can be noted along these lines that, seemingly paradoxically and certainly arguing against the essentialist interpretation that overemphasises the importance of the past for Eastern nationalisms *in general*, it was the emphasis on the future which was characteristic of the pastness of this semantic content, while that on the past was prefiguring the future positions that would altogether reject Western modernity during the interwar period.

However, lest one should be tempted to ascribe some ‘origins’ of the ‘ethnic’ type of ‘Eastern nationalism’ to this phase in the evolution of nationalisms in the region, it is important to recall that such criticisms and transformations of the liberal model were very much in line with contemporary developments in the ‘core’ canonical European culture. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, pervasive narratives of decline came to challenge the former positivist faith in progress, eventually surpassing them in cultural prominence by the *fin de siècle*. In France, degeneration theory had been inaugurated by Bénédict Morel in the 1850s and was subsequently popularised by Arthur Gobineau (Nye, 1984; Pick, 1989, pp. 37–106), while in Britain Darwin’s influence led to sociological theories of non-European societies that emphasised their allegedly immutable ‘inferiority’ and provided a new type of legitimation to the colonial project (Matena, 2010). In fact, the ‘Western’ attention to South-Eastern Europe was often prompted by such domestic concerns, rooted in growing evidence of the problems associated with industrial modernity and especially the perceived threat of an allegedly ‘dangerous’ proletariat inspired by radical socialist ideas (Foster, 2021, p. 28). In line with contemporary emphases on vitality and physical and moral health as a solution to perceived urban degeneration, such concerns could even prompt occasional (albeit rare) positive portrayals of South-East European peasants as embodying a pre-industrial ideal that could act as a ‘palliative for contemporary decadence’ in ‘the West’ (Perkins, 2015, pp. 578–580; Foster, 2021, pp. 26–36, here p. 26). Once again, the dynamics driving such associations were not lost on South-East European state-building elites, who boasted the fortuitous absence of a proletariat in their own societies (Sorescu, 2019, pp. 172–200).

Thus, at the turn of the century a pervasive sense of crisis and cultural despair (le Rider, 1993; Stern, 1974) all but replaced the earlier narratives of open-ended improvement, and

the quest for pre- or non-rational 'essences' was by no means limited to Eastern Europe. At a time that witnessed the 'Scramble for Africa', the heyday of scientific racism, and the emergence of modern anti-Semitism, South-East European nationalisms were once again synchronous with European culture, even as they denounced the earlier Western models that were being jettisoned in 'the West' as well. Unable to partake of the 'spatial fix' that overseas empire provided (Bell, 2018, p. 9), the newly established states in South-Eastern Europe embarked upon small-scale, regional imperial projects, a 'scramble' for Macedonia or Rumelia that eventually resulted in the two Balkan Wars.

The violence of the latter drew the attention and prompted the outrage of the Great Powers, as well as their immediate coding as the result of 'ancient hatreds' and a propensity to violence that came to be permanently associated with 'the Balkans' (Todorova, 1997, pp. 122–139). The horrified Western gaze saw what it had been trained to see by a century-long projection of 'backwardness' and temporal lag: atavistic behaviour and continuity with a violent past. Instead, as Siniša Malešević points out, what the Balkan Wars reflected was a facet of the region's modernity. Their difference from the previous wars of independence, in both scale and nature, was thus indicative of the 'military, bureaucratic and state expansion' whose result 'was the capability to mobilise large sectors of the population and field enormous armies' (Malešević, 2019, p. 170). These mass armies were well-trained according to European (often French) models – with officers undergoing 'instruction in Russia, Italy and Germany' and in turn drawing 'praise from foreign observers' – and well-equipped with modern weaponry, from Mannlicher rifles and Krupp guns to torpedo ships, armoured cruisers, and even a Greek submarine (Hall, 2000, pp. 15–21). As such, 'the Balkan Wars of 1912–13 were not a throwback to the past but a distinctly modern phenomenon' (Malešević, 2019, p. 170) and a prefiguration of the devastation that would affect all of Europe just one year later.

The aforementioned bureaucratisation and state expansion that took place in South-Eastern Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century was itself synchronous with similar developments in the European 'core', with nationalising processes in the metropolis proceeding in parallel to overseas colonisation. Eugen Weber's peasants inhabiting France in 1870 were 'savages' and 'troglodytes', similar to 'children' and 'animals', 'poor, backward, ignorant, savage, barbarous, wild, living like beasts with their beasts', and 'sometimes compared [...] unfavourably with other colonized peoples in North Africa and the New World' (Weber, 1976, pp. 5, 6). It is thus worth recalling that it was at precisely this time that 'peasants were turned not only into Greeks, Serbs, or Bulgarians but also into Frenchmen' (Todorova, 2005, p. 154). Moreover, viewed in this light, the catastrophic defeat of the Second Empire in the Franco-Prussian War that prompted the intensification of nation-building after 1870 can be seen as similar, *and ulterior*, to the scenario occurring in the Romanov Empire after the Crimean War (Moon, 1996). With imperial expansion, such processes extended beyond the borders of Europe, with Alice Conklin (1998, p. 432) noting that the *mission civilisatrice* in West Africa had its parallels, both ideational and logistic, in the Freycinet plan of 'building railroads throughout rural France in a conscious attempt to integrate another group of 'savages,' its own peasants, into both the marketplace and the nation'.

Eugen Weber's story of the modernisation of rural France has direct parallels in Siniša Malešević's account of the case of Serbia and his finding that for most of the nineteenth century 'nationalism and state expansion were still minority pursuits – an ideological

orientation confined to [the] urban, state employed, elite', while 'the rural population was generally less nationalist and more oriented towards religious conservatism, anti-statism and peasant populism' (Malešević, 2017, p. 138). Paying attention to the sub-state level and to the uneven transmission and reception of nationalist ideas also allows us to see that different social groups were susceptible differently, to differing degrees, and at different times to nationalist appeals. Such internal heterogeneity, encountered in 'core' and 'periphery' alike, combined with the aforementioned coexistence of different temporal registers and conceptual meanings, thus permits us to pose a challenge not only to the established binaries employed in approaching nationalism, but even to monolithic understandings of a dominant form of nationalism characteristic of a specific state at a given time. Thus, a focus on the competing nationalisms existing at any given time, not only in the international arena but also within states, as well as on the shifts in the nature of nationalisms over time and with the participation of new social groups to the political process, brings further indications of the pluralistic and contested nature of 'nationalism'. Furthermore, exploring the multiple competing nationalisms co-existing in different contexts – the liberal, conservative, social-democratic, agrarian, populist variants that modulated the concept – draws attention to the power relations and power struggles in which conceptual contestations were always embedded, as well as to the strategic functions they performed in nexuses of knowledge and power.

The parallels – between (South-)East and West, metropolitan France and colonial West Africa, complete with 'lateral' comparisons with 'other oppressed and vanquished nations as Ireland, Bohemia, Finland, and Poland' (Weber, 1976, p. 490) – and the synchronicity that become visible by combining broadenings and focalisations of the analytical lens 'above' and 'below' the national level paint a decidedly non-binary picture. In doing so, they debunk binary interpretations that posit Eastern and Western Europe as distinct geographical and historical spaces and expose instead the normative rather than analytical dimension of such distinctions, accounting for the persistence of readings of Eastern Europe along the lines of deviation, discrepancy, diversion from or lateness with respect to a Western-defined norm. Such an interpretation allows for the integration of the history of South-East European nationalisms as a story of relative conceptual synchronicity projected against the background of global processes associated with uneven development. In turn, this provides not only for the area's comparability with both Western European and non-European spaces, but also for the de-spatialising of notions of 'periphery' from their primarily geographical (or rather geopolitical) connotations. In doing so, this reading ultimately exposes the heterogeneity of the 'core', and the persistence of internal peripheries in its midst, which such binaries (as all other notions of civilizational hierarchies) aimed to mask by projecting outward (Harootunian, 2007).

## Conclusion

The present paper has tried to sketch the evolution of nationalism in South-Eastern Europe in a diachronic perspective, focusing on the conceptual shifts it undertook during the long nineteenth century. Its brevity makes it a necessarily modest contribution to the study of an area of dizzying complexity and internal variation. For example, along the lines of periodisation, the internal differences *between* countries and sub-areas in South-Eastern Europe on their paths to state- and nation-building are for the most part



overlooked by a narrative that privileges emphasis on the synchronicity between 'East' and 'West'. Its main purpose was to engage with and undermine the applicability of binary notions that draw on this cultural, civilisational, geopolitical, and ultimately normative distinction. It sought most of all to outline the fluid field of multiple intersecting, overlapping, and competing conceptualisations of nationalism and their relative salience across time, space and social structure, and by doing so to argue against the normative and teleologically retrospective view that takes as its premise the consolidation of the nation-state as the dominant form of statehood.

A few conclusions can be derived from this brief account, perhaps worth restating and emphasising. First off, the story of 'transfers' appears more nuanced and entangled, involving a variety of local actors and lateral transfers, a pragmatic engagement in this process carefully exploiting power asymmetries, as well proceeding primarily, but not exclusively, from 'West' to 'East'. Examples of transfers in a reverse order could occur at a symbolic level, as with the invocation of Hellenism as the foundation of Western civilisation by South-East European elites asking for support either for their independence movements or for post-independence state-building. As Greek state-builders invoked 'the rhetorical power' of a 'historical-cultural circuit' whereby 'ancient Greece had left France its sciences, arts, and technologies; now France would return the favour', French correspondents of the Moldovan boyar Nicolae Rosetti-Roznovanu could reciprocate:

It is indeed glorious for our society to see this Greece, to which Europe owes its enlightenment and civilization, come in turn to enlighten itself in France, and to take from [France] the models and process that will return to the Greeks the goods we have received from them' (Tipei, 2018, pp. 635, 639).

Another such example is the aforementioned re-discovery of Byzantium as both a civilizational claim for the region, preserving Christianity after its collapse in 'the West' as well as ensuring a continuity between Hellenic and Roman antiquity and modern Europe (Iorga, 1935). On a more practical level, the 'international visibility and academic reputations' of late nineteenth and early twentieth century local scholars of the region like Ivan Shishmanov, Jovan Cvijić, or Nicolae Iorga, the contributions they made to geography, ethnography, and historiography, 'foreground a truly transnational flow of ideas and communication between local and 'Western' concepts' (Mishkova, 2018, p. 63). Having influenced scholars ranging from Karl Lamprecht to Fernand Braudel and contributed decisively to the development of more transnational disciplinary approaches as well as to early notions of 'area studies', '[s]uch cases of knowledge transfer bespeak a movement of concepts and ideas that breaches the rampant view of a mono-dimensional west-to-east pattern' (Mishkova, 2018, p. 63). There were also less savoury East–West transfers, as with anti-Semitism, where local, peripheral actors could portray themselves as 'experts' in the matter vis-à-vis their fellow anti-Semitic elites in Western Europe, and Budapest in the 1880s could appear to Paris or Vienna as an anti-Semitic centre, reversing (and antedating) the situation that would prevail fifteen years later (Szabó, 2019). Perhaps the best known such example is the global trajectory of the infamous *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, the early twentieth century forgery of Pavel Krushevan, a peripheral anti-Semite writing in Kishinev, 'an agricultural depot at the edge of empire' (Zipperstein, 2018, p. 182).

Second, 'empire' plays an important role in this narrative, as the oft-ignored alternative model that was nevertheless conceptually entangled with nationalism throughout the

nineteenth century, when empires were nationalising their core populations and nations had imperial ambitions of their own, both externally and internally. As such, it undermines yet another pervasive binary in the study of nationalism, one that retrojects an image of 'nation' and 'empire' as antagonists and of nationalism as eminently anti-imperial (Anderson, 1983). The different organising principles of respectively empires and nations, with the former managing diversity through inequality and hierarchisation and the latter advocating homogenisation in the name of equality, appear themselves entangled, and it is the transfer of this entanglement that can help illuminate the tensions and power struggles over definitions of the boundaries of citizenship (Cârstocea, 2020).

Time comes to play an important role, both in the overlap of temporal layers – Reinhart Kosseleck's *Zeitschichten* – in the conceptual structure of 'nationalism', and in the temporalisation playing out internationally between lag and synchronicity with the 'core'. The cultural and conceptual synchronicity that emerges from a *longue durée* view of the evolution of nationalisms in South-Eastern Europe over the long nineteenth century undermines deeply embedded notions of temporal lag where, as in Weber's (1976, p. 97) eighteenth century story, distances from the 'core' are measurable in kilometres transferable into years. Instead of reified, essentialist differences, the developmental lack and temporal lag appears thus more as an internal dynamic, a matter of different institutional and infrastructural capacities. But in this respect, as shown above, peasants were yet to be made into Frenchmen, and London was as far in temporal and civilizational terms from 'the new industrial hells in Lancashire and Yorkshire' as it was from 'the Balkans', to which the former were in fact occasionally compared (Rebecca West, cited in Todorova, 1994, p. 470). What this exposes in turn is the hegemony of the modernisation narrative, whose terms of difference are articulated not merely according to a developmental geography, but also through categories of class, gender, or religion.

An integral component of the 'age of questions', when read in this key 'nationalism' appears less isolated or dominant, and more intimately imbricated with other 'questions' of the time, be they the social – itself a composite including the worker, woman, agrarian, apartment, and even oyster question (Case, 2018, p. 198) – or the European. Traversed by an overarching emancipatory drive and animated by a sense of urgency, the simultaneity of questions and their tendency to cluster around certain events (of which the crisis of 1876–1878, for example, was especially important for South-Eastern Europe) reveal a temporality that was articulated at the level of an international public sphere, which they helped bring about. Distinctions between 'domestic' and 'international' concerns can be exposed as artificial, as with the Irish or Algerian questions, which, although comparable (and compared) to the Eastern or Polish questions, were often framed 'as 'social' as opposed to national' in an attempt of 'imperial apologists [...] to keep them domestic, and out of the international public sphere' (Case, 2018, p. 64). Of these, the 'Eastern Question' loomed large as one of the most significant 'questions', because it invoked the prospect of a general European war, which others, such as the Irish question, did not (Berber, 2007; Keisinger, 2015).

And while the 'age of questions' was a European phenomenon, with ramifications at least across the Atlantic if not globally, and always aimed at the universal, different actors had different weights in formulating questions, as well as their inevitable 'solutions'. Just as a sense of agency understood as the capacity for self-government was

seen as essential to 'successful', 'civic' nationalism (Sluga, 2002), such agency was consistently denied to South-East European elites by their 'Western' counterparts, who arrogated to themselves the right to decide who was capable of self-determination and who was not. The connections, but also the significant differences between the minority protection and mandate systems developed at the end of the First World War constitute ample proof of the 'Western' prerogative over ascertaining the legitimacy of claims to self-government (Cârstocea, 2020; Wheatley, 2017). Civilisational hierarchies were not immutable, but changing over time, just as the framing of 'nationalism' in South-Eastern Europe could oscillate between being hailed as progress and liberation and feared as the cause for further turmoil and atrocities, as well as shift in its 'meaning' – from 'universal liberal goals', through the 'rise of nationality' (Perkins, 2015, p. 585), to the (partial and clearly bounded) right to self-determination (Manela, 2007; Wolff, 2020). However, such hierarchies ultimately *defined* the East–West binary and contributed to perpetuating it, including in our contemporary Anglo-centric academia, still invested in British perceptions of Eastern Europe rather than in recovering the voices of local actors.

Ultimately, a perspective focusing on synchronicity aims to transcend binaries in the study of nationalism (and beyond) as part of a recent attempt (e.g. Mishkova, 2018; Sorescu, 2018a; Tipei, 2018) to restore agency to local actors by drawing attention to their role in *shaping* the circumstances of their interaction with 'the West'. Without overlooking the highly asymmetrical nature of the relationship, which meant they were rarely if ever in a position to set its terms, my argument here is that, against notions of some prostrate 'Eastern' elites in thrall of Western modernity, local actors were very much aware of this asymmetry, attuned to the European cultural canon, and attempting to the best of their ability to use it for their own purposes. The stakes of such an endeavour, in Alex Tipei's words, are to 'rethink the ways the centre and periphery interact with one another' (Tipei, 2018, p. 624), ultimately with a view to reconsidering their mutual constitution in the process, as well as of accommodating a broader, despatialised, and less normative view of 'core' and 'periphery'. Politically, the synchronicity I emphasise is meant to take us beyond the problematic binary that apportions blame to the West and victimhood status to the 'Balkans', in favour of a more fluid, plural, and 'provincialized' reading of 'Europe' as a whole, traversed in all directions by transnational dynamics with a global resonance. Following Johannes Fabian's critique of anthropology as 'an allochronic discourse; [...] a science of other men in another Time', and his conclusion that 'there are ways to meet the Other on the same ground, in the same time' (Fabian, 1983, pp. 143, 155), the emphasis on synchronicity and the agency of local actors in transfer and adaptation processes is part of the attempt to do just that. Consequently, to the image of a self-contained, geographically delimited, and 'wholly Other' 'East', of rigid and immutable differences, the present account substitutes a picture of an area emerging as 'modern' (and 'national') in its specifically dialogical relationship with an imagined 'West' and in the context of global patterns of uneven development.

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## Note on contributor

**Dr. Raul Cârstocea** is Lecturer in Twentieth-Century European History at Maynooth University. He has previously worked as Lecturer in Modern European History at the University of Leicester, Lecturer in European Studies at the Europa Universität Flensburg, Germany, Senior Research Associate at the European Centre for Minority Issues, Teaching Fellow at University College London, and held research fellowships at the Imre Kértesz Kolleg Jena and the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies. His research interests focus on anti-Semitism, Jewish history, nationalism, fascism, and the Holocaust, and more broadly on state formation and nation-building processes in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Central and Eastern Europe and their consequences for minority groups.

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