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The Narcissism of Minor Differences in the Context of Post-Imperial Macedonian Neighbouring[1]

The archetype of the Conqueror – between space and identity

In so-called pre-historic and mythical times, people first appropriated the space of their original existence, considering it to be *their own* land. The various narratives on one's own land are based on similar understandings of space that has been conquered: one's own property, one's own inheritance, one's own identity. This idea of one's own land becomes inseparable from the idea of one's own tribe/nation.

Thus, the ideas of territory and nation become one story – the first cult consensus of collective identity. This, in turn, instigates the mutual reception of individual and collective identity, triggering the initial distinction between *our own* identity and *the other's* identity, as related to another space, another nation, another culture. Finally, this is how the idea of one's own material and immaterial heritage is born, intertwining the immanent and the inherent in an indivisible whole.

Ultimately, an awareness is born of the insufficiency of the current space and a longing arises for the Other space; this aspiration for the enlarging of the current space results in the idea of conquering foreign lands, near and far, with all of their property. This ambition creates the archetype of the Conqueror: a hegemon, a ruler, a tyrant. The enlarging of the space promotes the feeling of power, and power creates the illusion that conquests are legitimate. This legitimacy illusion turns into ideology, and ideology turns into the practice of ruling the Other. In his novel *The Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad says that "the conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion" can be justified if it is based on some idea, "something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to…" (Conrad, 1899/2013, p. 9). He was referring to the "Belgian Congo" (1908–1960) as a parable of Western European conquests of distant "geographical entities", such as African, Asian and American ones.[2]

History has yet to identify the idea that can *justify* colonialism when, in fact, there is no such idea that can justify the brutal futility of such conquests. There have been mere attempts to *explain* the colonial codex using historical, social, geopolitical and mythopoetic categories.[3] However, the explanation itself is neither an excuse nor a guarantee that colonialism will be abolished. Being aware of the consequences of colonial practices is not enough to end them: in reality, the mistakes of history only get perfected.

According to E. Said's theory, imperialistic conquests contribute to civilization because "one of imperialism's achievements was to bring the world closer together", therefore "most of us should now regard the historical experience of empire as a common one" (Said, 1994, pp. xxi, xxii). If we are to agree with this thesis, then we must take into consideration the fact that the common colonial and imperial experience does not only refer to the experiences passed on by the colonizer to the colonized people: it also refers to the local experi-

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[2] A distinction exists between this exogenous and domiciled colonialism (Austro-Hungarian, Russian).

[3] "Historians are among the most significant peacemakers" (Brunnbauer, 2018, p. 292).

ence exchanged among the colonies themselves on the peripheries of empires. Such is the case with the empires that connected the Balkan, Middle Eastern and Mediterranean peoples and cultures.

The argument that imperialism has contributed to civilization is used to minimize the brutality of colonial power. This is the case when violence is involved against populations that are marked by visible differentiating qualities. Major differences create the illusion that colonialism has a meaning that justifies its radical evil! Indeed, major differences give narrative meaning to the conquering projects of the colonial centres of power. By conquering distant natural and social properties, colonizers are faced with the phenomenon of the *exotic identity of the native peoples, which is visibly racially and culturally different* from that of the colonizer.[4]

The post-imperial internal Balkan colonialism

The common imperial experience of the south of Europe is marked by cultural hegemony because the decolonization from the Ottoman Empire was carried out unevenly. Some nations in the Balkans were decolonized earlier than others and, under such circumstances, conditions were created for the reproduction of the colonial pattern in the closest vicinity (Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia, Macedonia, Thrace). The uneven decolonization of the Balkan people further creates social differences, and the new restructuring of these territories that results in newly created nation-states comes not only from internal resistance but also from the influence of the powerful European monarchies that created peace treatises (the San Stefano Treaty from March 3, 1878; the Berlin Treaty from July 13, 1878; the Bucharest Treaty from August 10, 1913).

19th-century Balkan cultural hegemony is a sophisticated manifestation of colonialism: negation, assimilation and domination over the neighbouring collective identities. It is not a matter of the Western European discovery of America and the conquest of the land of the native "Indian Americans" followed by the destruction of their particular "culture and civilization" (D. Brown, 1970,

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[4] For cultural anthropologists, 'race' is a "cultural construction, not a biological fact. It is in reality a kind of ideology, redefining the traditional concept of race…" (MacEachern, 2022, p. 36).

p. 23); nor is it a matter of the colonization and ethnocide of the exotic. It is a matter of culturally related and spatially neighbouring identities. It is also not a matter of the differences of "radical cultural otherness" (Hage, 2012, p. 288; Simić, 2014, p. 103). It is a matter of minor differences resulting from the evolution of identities in space and time, through myth and history, due to isolation or communication, aided by propaganda, media and hegemonistic rhetoric.

The recent, adoptive Balkan ethnocentrism defines the shared cultural and historical heritage as a common heritage, and common heritage as national heritage: so, the common Balkan heritage is conquered and appropriated as *My heritage, My history, My language, My culture, My people*. Such possessiveness results in the politics of negation and the colonization of the identity of the Neighbour. This approach is colonial/neo-colonial. The Balkan identity hegemony leaves the impression of being absurd, expansive and aggressive at the same time. It creates an identity confusion, and this is how the "Macedonian question" was created: by denying and appropriating the Macedonian cultural identity in space and time, therefore creating the conditions of delicate migrational and geostrategic politics, and the politics of "self-Orientalization" (Bjelić, 2003, p. 35).[5]

The narcissism of minor differences

"The inclination towards aggression" in people and different communities as well as conflicting identity differences are the subject of research into the theory of the "narcissism of minor differences" (Freud, 1918/1994b, p. 114),[6] mentioned by Freud in 1918 in his lecture and essay "The Taboo of Virginity", and later in "Civilisation and its Discontent" (1994/1930).[7] Minor differences have an ambivalent charm that is so obsessive (if not hysterical) that it instigates an irrational

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[5] During the Civil War in Greece, the Macedonian language population from Aegean Macedonia was exiled, the memory of this territory was wiped clean (toponyms were translated from Macedonian to Greek), and freedom of self-declaration was obstructed (Macedonians were forced by law to declare themselves as *Greeks by birth*).

[6] In the original, it was first mentioned in Freud's essay "The Taboo of Virginity" (Freud, 1918/1994b, p. 199), presented in a lecture in Vienna on December 19th, 1917, in which Freud says that "it is precisely the minor differences in people who are otherwise alike that form the basis of feelings of strangeness and hostility between them".

[7] Conflicting similarity on an individual level exists even between identical twins or doppelgangers (Nagle & Clancy, 2010, p. 212).

desire to own the absent historical and mythical times. By creating its object of mimetic desire, it creates an imaginary Other. It ignores the fact that the Other is particular in its similarity and similar in its particularity. It forgets that there is a subtle way to be together, to be in union. Narcissistic desire with a political background is like a blind point leading to *an impasse.* Mimetic desire and mimetic rivalry (Girard, 1965) are two faces of the same phenomenon of controversial admiration: to deny the object of desire until you lose it (Scubla, 2013, p. 6).

But "the rhetoric of power all too easily produces an illusion of benevolence when deployed in an imperial setting" (Said, 1994, p. xvii). Colonial narcissism creates a public illusion of innocence despite the fact that it suppresses the Other in multiple ways: social hierarchy, cultural hegemony, mainstream media propaganda, inferiority complex. This narcissism is particularly complex in the case of neighbouring colonialism over Others with minor differences. In the absence of "objective cultural markers" (Kolstø, 2007, p. 168), this narcissism provokes a number of reactions to minor differences between bordering nations: mockery, dark humour, negative stereotypes, media hate speech, blockades, vetoes, political conflicts and, finally, violent civil conflicts (such are the examples with the Portuguese and the Spanish, English and Irish, Northern and Southern Germans).[8] Contemporary empirical analyses of the ethnic conflicts after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 show that minor ethnic, religious and linguistic differences, not just major ones, can be the cause of violence and national supremacy. Not just the distant past but also the modern age is full of examples of civil and other armed conflicts between communities characterized by "mimetic cultural similarity" (Nagle & Clancy, 2010, p. 212).

Colonialism is inspired by a discriminatory relationship with neighbouring identities. It either overaccentuates the similarities or denies the differences. In either case, the purpose is to appropriate other identities and, with them, other territories. This comes to play in particular when the differences in political and institutional power are great, when some neighbouring countries exhibit colonial territorial and cultural interest towards a neighbour who has not managed to build a stable state formation or has no support from international centres of power.

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[8] "I once discussed the phenomenon that it is precisely communities with adjoining territories, and related to each other in other ways as well, who are engaged in constant feuds and in ridiculing each other – like the Spaniards and Portuguese, for instance, the North Germans and South Germans, the English and Scots, and so on. I gave this phenomenon the name of 'the narcissism of minor differences', a name which does not do much to explain it" (Freud, 1930/1994a, p. 114).

"In many cases of ethic and nationalistic conflict, the deepest hatred is between nations which – based on visible differences – show the least differences. It is one of civilization's greatest contradictions" (Hitchens, 2010).[9] Such is the case with bloody conflicts between "same ones", spurred on by media and political manipulation of minor differences (Hitchens, 2010), further aided by traumatic places in the collective memory (Kramarić, 2020). "In order to understand why some conflicts turn violent and others don't, we should not look for objectively given differences, but for differences in *perception* and *the way these perceptions are publicly displayed*. This means that public rhetoric and speech are of great significance" (Kolstø, 2007, p. 169).

The actualization of imagological prejudice against a neighbour in public media and in the political and social space signals that an old latent hegemonistic matrix is being renewed. The manipulative exaggeration of minor differences is not a naïve indicator of the crisis of the presentation of national and cultural others: the narcissism of minor differences is a major factor in the recent and current neighbouring conflicts in Europe, including the Balkans. Minor physical, religious, ethnic, social and cultural differences are a source of xenophobia, chauvinism, a cover-up for the fragmentation of society, and a violent change of the existing systems and borders. This occurrence is a dominant form of the actualization of the ancient conquering strategy of "divide et impera" of the Balkans (Ќулавкова, 2006).

The narcissism of minor differences and the case of Macedonian cultural intimacy

There are similar cultural identities in peoples from neighbouring countries that result from previous social and imperial constellations. It is those bordering European countries whose identities are over-determined by history, difficult to interpret, and, especially, their state sovereignty is difficult

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[9] Christopher Hitchens (2010) gives many examples of violent conflicts marked by the phenomenon of minor differences: between the Uzbek minority and the Kyrgyz majority in Kyrgyzstan; between the Turks and Greeks in Cyprus; between the Tutsi and the Hutu in Rwanda and Burundi; between the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland; between the Sinhala and the Tamil in Sri Lanka; between the Shiite and the Sunni in Iraq; between the Iranian and the Iraqi Shiite; among the Croats, Serbs and Bosnians; in Yugoslavia, between Orthodox and Catholic, and between Christians and Muslims.

to recognize internationally. These identities are often an object of colonial interest, presented in the form of cultural hegemony.[10]

Unlike the Nordic countries, which managed to solve the problem of minor differences in a non-colonial, inclusive and tolerant manner, cultural hegemony is again on the scene in the so-called "Western Balkans". In the post-Yugoslav period (after 1991), new independent states emphasized the policy of "cultural intimacy" (Herzfeld, 2016), which is related to some aspects of their identity which were problematic in the international context but were useful for populistic self-reflection. An extraordinary example of cultural misinterpretation and misrecognition is the Macedonian culture, which was well established in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The Macedonian case could not be explained outside of the neighbouring context: Greece, Bulgaria, Albania, Serbia.

The current misinterpretation of Macedonian identity is such an example due to the fact that some of its neighbouring countries are members of the EU, while others are not, and Macedonia's neighbours which are EU members have not been forced to give any concessions to harmonize their cultural politics with European standards. In contrast, the Republic of Macedonia, ever since its reception into the UN (in 1993, two years after the referendum for independence), has faced procedural precedents that culminated in the rhetoric of an ultimatum disguised as an agreement (June 18th, 2017). The political performance of that entire rhetoric is no longer just Balkan but European as well.

The systematic negation of realistically established collective identities and state identities leads to 1) cultural hegemony (Kulavkova, 2021), in which, ironically, the conqueror plays the role of the victim; 2) military occupation under the guise of performing administrative duties, like with Bulgaria's occupation of Macedonia from 1941 to 1945, which Bulgaria presented as "natural administration" and "liberation" of its national territories (Додевски, 2021, pp. 275–299); 3) civil conflicts and politics of ethnocide, all in order to create ethnic borders and, through these, new territorial borders (the exile of Macedonians during the Civil War from 1946 to 1949).

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[10] According to S. Huntington, big differences between cultural (civilization) identities, and not small ones (minor differences), will be the "fundamental source of conflict" (Huntington, 1996, p. 32) "in the post-Cold War world" (Huntington, 1996, p. 72).

Colonization of similar cultural identities

Some types of colonization are physical while others are metaphysical. The former focus on exploiting people and nature, while the latter focus on cultural and political domination. The latter are interested in cultural and historical identities because they are efficient in their discretion. The conquest of cultures begins in the form of metaphysical violence, which, once radicalized, creates "deadly identities".[11] Metaphysical violence is the perfect image of hegemony.[12] It has its own paradigm, its exclusive approach to interpreting history, its methods of conversion, as well as its legalized codex; as a result, cultural hegemony is a recognizable and predictable occurrence that can be encouraged or prevented.

In the 19th century, Balkan colonialism remained directed towards the neighbouring entities. This is very likely a reflection of the century-old imperialistic tradition. The hegemonistic consciousness transformed itself but never truly disappeared from the historical stage. The conquest of cultural identities is a variant of the Conqueror archetype.

However, identities are the most problematic space to conquer: a fortress that is very difficult to access and even more difficult to tear down. Cultural identities are both a sensitive and a resistant 'matter'. Obsessive denial instigates obsessive resistance because, as colonial pressure encourages resistance, it also strengthens the collective consciousness, which strives to articulate itself politically and institutionally. Thus, resistance against cultural hegemony is a key factor for the survival of identity, and identity traditions are based on a *culture of resistance*. Wherever there is cultural hegemony, there will be a culture of resistance.

The 19th century saw the dethronement of the colonial and imperial matrix that connected the Balkans to the Apennine Peninsula, the Middle East, Africa, and the Mediterranean in general. Since the imperial epoch, local hegemonies in the Balkans have kept multiplying (Greek, Bulgarian, Serbian, nowadays also Albanian). Thus, large, transethnic and culturally flexible empires are frag-

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[11] The syntagm *tyranny over identities* is created as an allusion to Amin Maalouf's term *deadly identities/les identités meurtrières* (Maalouf, 1998).

[12] Ivan Čolović (2008, pp. 7–8), quoting Terry Eagleton (2002, p. 51), writes about the "terror of culture" as "explosive material" for conflict.

mented and replaced by small ethnocentric entities. The Balkan nation-states (Greece, Bulgaria, Albania) promoted the policies of the dominant constitutive ethnoses, cultures and religions. This when the perception of domicile minorities and neighbouring ethnicities (some of them with minor, almost invisible differences; others with greater visible ones) is ambivalent. Slavic and non-Slavic Balkan Otherness become objects of assimilation, conversion, marginalization or discrimination. The intercultural perception projects images of the neighbouring Other more reversibly than stereotypically, followed by appropriate pragmatic policies and propaganda. The Balkan hegemony has not only a historical but also a mythical dimension (Smith, 1999). The post-Ottoman fragmentation of the territory of Macedonia, whose history spans a wide range of epochs (Imperial, South Slavic, national-Macedonian, post-Macedonian), is a result of regional political platforms and peace agreements. Along with its territory, the Macedonian demographic, cultural, historical and metaphysical spaces have been fragmented beyond recognition.

Macedonia in the context of the narcissism of minor differences

According to political perception, Macedonia is a zone of colonial interest hidden behind the concept of alleged problematic identity. The new mapping of the cultural space is the preparation of a new hegemony. On Macedonian ground, whose territory remained part of the Ottoman Empire for the longest, local hegemonistic propaganda come to the fore for the conquest of the Macedonian ethnic, local and geographic space (Јовановски, 2021, pp. 221–244). The hegemony of Macedonia's neighbours is directed towards the conquest of the cultural and historical identity of the Macedonians. It is based on the premise that if the cultural history of the Macedonians is conquered, Macedonia shall be conquered as well. The cultural hegemony is used to legitimize the conquering actions of the neighbours by denying the legitimacy and uniqueness of the Macedonian identity: historical, linguistic, demographic, political and religious (the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church).

Macedonia is a prime example of a country that is the object of local Balkan hegemony and wider colonial interest, supported by the controversial theory

of the ambivalent Macedonian identity. Namely, the public rhetoric presents Macedonia as a geographical territory deprived of a cultural recognizability and as a country of intertwined identities ("a Macedonian salad"). Colonial and identity complexes are used by the current south Slavic narcissism of minor differences, supplemented by narcissism among nations that share the territory of Macedonia (geographic, demographic, cultural and historical). The conflicting narcissism enables a mutual projection of common and neighbouring identities which is just a guise of pretensions to identity and territory. An impression is created that, even in the 21st century, some nation-states are dissatisfied with themselves and attempt to revise their own identity by reaching for a similar neighbouring one with which they share historical places of memory, territory and population.

A) *Bulgarian national narcissism* is explicit in its ethno-linguistic, cultural and historic pretensions. The discourse on Macedonia as Bulgarian land and Macedonians as "Macedonian Bulgarians" seeks arguments by misinterpreting the shared imperial and colonial places of memory. In essence, it is a combination of utopia and negative utopia. It might be described as a projection of the inner conflict of the contemporary Bulgarian nation, which contains a significant portion of assimilated Macedonian emigrants and native Macedonians (in the Pyrin mountain region). The conservative concept of a homogenous Bulgarian nation faces other risks today, but the political focus remains obsessively directed towards the Macedonian identity.[13] The more the Macedonian identity is problematized, the more the disconnection grows between these two nations and the more the Macedonian existential gap is widened. The Bulgarian narcissism of minor differences neglects places of memory that are not shared with Macedonians and that do not fit Bulgarian self-perception. In a situation in which cultural and historical heritage become objects of antagonistic interpretations, this irrational conflict becomes brutally pragmatic, even tragicomic, because it defends something that is not under attack from anyone. Mythomania, supremacy, nationalistic rhetoric and ultimatums look like tyranny over identity and not options for good neighbouring. It seems that inherited similarities, including the Macedonian population found in neighbouring countries, are not enough to promote post-hegemonistic speech of empathy. Bulgarian narcissism has reached the point of absurdity when it questions

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[13] Political obsession and hysteria are symptoms of mimetic rivalry and desire (Girard, 1965).

the very meaning of identity and not just its borders. It is no longer a matter of the cultural markers of the neighbouring country: it is a matter of one's own identity.

B) *Greek narcissism* is hybrid and is related to the neighbouring position that is a historical constant between the Greek and the Macedonian peoples; it refers more to the mixed bordering zones than to the commonalities between the Greek and the Macedonian identities (in the recent past, Greece recognized Macedonians as Slavic Macedonian). This hybrid narcissism of minor differences manifested itself in the period after the constitution of the Hellenic nation-state and was radicalized after the establishment of the independent Republic of Macedonia in 1991, when the Hellenic Republic decided to revise its own national narration through the Macedonian prism. Greek narcissism reflects the collective anxiety caused by the cult of the inherited antique supremacy. It appears that the existence of a sovereign Macedonian nation-state could dethrone this cult. The idea that the Macedonian nation cannot exist outside of Greece caused the redefining of the Greek identity by the redefining of the Macedonian one. The appropriation of the entire Macedonian ancient heritage, both physical and metaphysical, has seemingly protected contemporary Greeks from the delicate layers of their national identity, but in essence it has added fuel to their internal conflicting narcissism and ambivalent identity. Greece is officially hiding the presence of its Slavic-Macedonian minority, toponyms and dialects. In the last few decades, it has promoted a policy of exclusive "possession" of complex antique cultural history through its mystification, misinterpretation and revision (the exclusive interpretation of the concept of Greekness). The historical fact remains that Greece has gained most of its contemporary territories and population by way of peaceful agreements and other special methods (family exile, requesting Greek-by-birth declarations to issue Greek citizenship, population exchange, not recognizing national minorities). Greece is, therefore, a paradigm of the exclusive interpretation of cultural heritage (material and immaterial), including the generic terminology related to that heritage (e.g., the ethnonym 'Romei' in the Ottoman period was a generic term for all peoples of the Eastern Roman Empire).

C) The *Serbian narcissism of minor differences* is reflection of some historical facts that have evolved into cult places of collective memory. This is the Serbian medieval narrative that Macedonia is 'Old Serbia' – a narrative that is resurrected as needed. The bordering zones of the cultural identity

of the Serbs and the Macedonians are a solid foundation for the dominance of the Serbian state over ethno-geographical Macedonia, whose status remained undecided until 1944. In the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, Serbian narcissism was marked by propagandistic educational, cultural and media politics. It was and still remains a replica of Greek and Bulgarian competitive hegemonistic aspirations. Since the breaking apart of the Yugoslav Federation, it has been reduced to a rival interpretation of the canonical status of the Serbian Orthodox Church as a church-parent to the Macedonian Orthodox Church. The intention to be ecclesiastically dominant indicates the absence of interethnic and intercultural tolerance. The existing cultural differences do not create tensions but rather balance the relationships between the Serbian and Macedonian Orthodox Churches.[14] In times of networking among the hegemonistic and negative strategies of Macedonia's other neighbours (Greece, Bulgaria, Albania), one might expect to see a radicalization of the Serbian positions as well, but for the moment the official Serbian policy remains in the shadows of mimetic empathy. This empathy seems to be not only a reflection of nostalgia for the peaceful Yugoslav epoch (1945–1991), but also a sign of a long-term geopolitical and cultural strategy of future sustainable neighbouring cooperation and integration. The explicit proof of this strategy is the fact that the 'tomos' of recognition of the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric was officially handed over on June 5, 2022 in Belgrade.[15]

    D) *Albanian narcissism* has a shorter chronological history but much stronger political power. In the last three decades, it has moved systematically from the zone of latent cultural, political and territorial pretensions to the zone of manifest/explicit ones. It, too, has its own hegemonistic narrative, which, when not finding support in recent history, turns to the mystification of ancient history and calls upon the principle of autochthony.

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    [14] The Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church decided to unanimously approve, bless and recognize the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric (MOC-OA), said the Patriarch of Serbia Porphyry in Skopje, on 24 of May 2022 (*SPC priznala autokefalnost MPC-Ohridske arhiepiskopije, 2022*).
    [15] Serbian Patriarch Porfirij today (05.06.2022) in the Cathedral Church in Belgrade handed over the tomos with which the SOC recognizes the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church to the Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonia Stefan (*Patriarch Porfirij hands over tomos to MOC Archbishop Stefan, 2022*).

Albanian narcissism counts on visible (non-mimetic) cultural differences, especially linguistic ones and, to an extent, religious and customary ones. It is delicate because it is mostly internal (Macedonian Albanians) rather than external (Albania, Kosovo) and, as such, it is initially related to the concept of a separational, inferior and heterogenous Otherness, particularly in relation to the Slavic identity in the Balkan neighbourhood. This intense ethnonationalist perception and auto-perception of Albanian ethnicity instigated the culture of resistance.[16] This resistance, although initially quiet, has since gained conflicting rivalling dimensions. It is based on mythomaniacal conceptions of autochthony that are automatically a cover for a superior status in the here and now. In recent times, the Albanian identity asserts itself as a status and social privilege, internationally protected and institutionally promoted (systematic revisions of the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonian since 1991). In the first two decades of the 21st century, the key difference between the Macedonian and the Albanian languages generated a politics of legal precedents (the Albanian language as a mandatory state language). Albanian political and cultural hegemony is installed administratively and leaves a dominant mark on the state entity of North Macedonia. The Albanian factor, which used to be marginal, now explicitly articulates its colonialist intention.

    E) This network of the supremacist platforms of Macedonia's neighbours exhibits discrete and indiscrete indications of "neighbourhood tyranny". When cultural hegemony connects to political hegemony and becomes a dominant geopolitical tendency in the 'West Balkans', *Macedonian narcissism* becomes a logical response and a sign of resistance. The discursive resistance is moderate and is aimed at Macedonian national self-awareness, which in turn is a 'point of weakness' in the evolution of the Macedonian ethnic, cultural and political entity. This point of weakness is the consequence of the discrepancy between the weak institutional and international support and the powerful domino effect of neighbouring and European geostrategic interests. Today, Macedonian narcissism aims not only to point out its own differences but also to demystify the discourses of neighbouring identities as a pretext for territorial aspirations.

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    [16] "Conflicts occur when one or more groups mobilize to achieve political goals on the basis of their ethnicity…", when ethnicity changes to "ethno-nationalism" (Nagle & Clancy, 2010, pp. 17–18).

The shared and non-shared places of memory

The complex Balkan history can be observed as a network of particular ethno-national stories and discourses. The collective memory is nuanced – not black or white. It makes a time-space continuum between the positive stereotype of the Balkans as a 'cradle of civilisations' and the opposite one, namely as a 'powder keg' (Ќулавкова, 2006). It is connected to a cultural heritage which has many contact zones. These contact zones are often, but not always, shared places of memory (realms of memory; Nora, 1996),[17] albeit not shared places of the same memory: the contact zones of traumatic memory produce multiple and contradictory national stories. The *shared places* refer to major transnational historical and religious figures, events and cultural goods.[18] They are a source of empathy and antipathy, according to their actual interpretation. The same shared places of history can make diverse memories and small or big narcissisms. *Non-shared places of memory*, in turn, mark differentiating cultural experiences and identities. If shared places of memory bring together different Balkan people and establish a common Balkan cultural co-existence that cannot be differentiated on the basis of a strict national principle, then the non-shared places of memory are important for the evolution of separate cultural identities. Shared places mark historical continuity, while non-shared places mark historical discontinuity. Continuity makes big imperial and transnational stories, while discontinuity generates small and separate ethnic identities.[19]

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[17] P. Nora (1996) focuses on the image of the French themselves, the French nation, its culture and symbols: from the Gallic Rooster and Paris, through Descartes and Joan of Arc, to the French language.

[18] The historical figures of Alexander the Great, the saints Cyril and Methodius, the Byzantine emperor Constantine, the old church-Slavonic Glagolitic, and Cyrillic script, for instance, are basically the Balkan shared sites of memory, but they also have some universal dimension.

[19] Macedonians do not share all the Bulgarian places of memory and, vice versa, Bulgarians do not share all the Macedonian places of memory. Oblivion and indifference towards some historical figures/events indicate zones without historical, political and contact between Macedonians and Bulgarians. Macedonians have no emotional and intellectual memory of the ancient Bulgarian Hans and Princes (Asparuh, Krum, Omurtag, Kaloyan). Tsar Samoil conquered medieval Bulgaria and ruled over it from 998 to 1014, and he ruled over medieval Macedonia from 969 to 1018. During the first 28 years of Samoil's rule (from 969 to 997), the Bulgarian Empire had its own rulers (Boris II from 969 to 971 and Roman from 977 to 997). The large Macedonian migrant and domicile population partially inserts its memory into the official Bulgarian narrative.

The non-shared places of memory can be illustrated by this example: not all pre-Christian and Christian experiences, rituals, myths, symbols and memories are shared, nor are all the experiences connected to great migrations, different empires and principalities, historical people and heroic figures. Ultimately, not all linguistic experiences are shared, although they contain interlinguistic contacts and influences.[20] These non-shared places of memory are zones of ethnic differentiation that map the space of cultural identities. The identity differences are not, in themselves, a problem. The problem arises when these differences are misinterpreted and politically abused. In such cases, even the most minor identity differences instigate extreme narcissism and a superiority complex (higher race, higher nation), including fratricide.[21] The archetype of fratricide, described in the biblical myth of Cain and Abel, is based on the principle of blood relations and origin, showing that a common origin alone does not suffice for peaceful living.

The shared and non-shared places of memory make the Balkans an archive of not only cultural identities but also of imagological stereotypes and prejudices. Perhaps this is the origin of the conviction that "the specificity of the Balkan identity is an ambivalent relation to our own identity" (Желињски, 2006, p. 53). The concept of an autochthonous, unique and superior identity is cyclically abused in the interpretation of identities to the extent that it becomes a cover-up for tragic experiences: war, genocide, exile of peoples, the collapse of countries. Such a space can only be a paradigm of dialogue or a conflict among cultures. The misinterpretation of differences by media and politics is reason enough for hegemony in the Balkans. In other words, the results of differences depend on their perception.

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[20] The dual concept of one's own vs. the other's is related to the historical experience of ancient times, when the difference between the civilized Us (the Hellenes) and the Others (the barbarians, the native peoples, the first nations) was very big. Such a worldview is based on a premise: a different language – a different people; a different culture – a different world. Paolo Heywood (2017) rejects the traditional interpretation of culture because 'cultures' "may differ, but nature does not". The contemporary ontological turn states that "anthropology is fundamentally concerned with difference, but it has only recently come to be concerned not only with difference per se, as 'cultural' difference, but with, as it were, different kinds of difference – with notions of material or corporeal difference as opposed to cultural difference" (Heywood, 2017, p. 9).

[21] "Everywhere I've been, nationalism is most violent where the group you are defining yourself against most closely resembles you […] the very similarity is what pushes them to define themselves as polar opposites. Since Cain and Abel, we have known that hatred between brothers is more ferocious than hatred between strangers" (Ignatieff, 1993, p. 255).

Postface to an open post-hegemonistic interpretation

This interpretation of the Macedonian neighbouring narcissism of minor differences in the last two centuries suggests the necessity of a post-hegemonial approach to the shared Balkan, Mediterranean and European historical and cultural heritage and reality. Cultural similarities, as well as cultural differences, are multiple enough to be observed not as historical baggage but as an intercultural and regional advantage. A difference in cultural identity and *moderate distance* (Nagle & Clancy, 2010, p. 213) is more stimulating for peaceful coexistence than total mimetic similarity. A few aspects in this sense will be noted instead of a conclusion:

1) The concept of neighbouring countries is seemingly constant yet variable due to the fact that a) borders of great empires do change, but not often; b) the Balkan nation-states of the modern epoch are dissatisfied with their original borders, states and identities and thus insist on changing them; and c) global geostrategic interests intersect in the Balkans, resulting in sporadic changes of borders. The process that started in the 19th century of establishing the nation-states of Greece and Bulgaria is far from complete even in the 21st century. This poses a question regarding whether nowadays, instead of a post-hegemonistic Balkans, there is a reversion to the cultural hegemony of the 19th century, but this time an even more complex one.

2) The concept of neighbouring countries at times hyperbolizes and at other times minimizes the civilizational differences among neighbouring peoples. This ambivalence results from the fact that contemporary differences reflect the once-great *Balkan cultural matrix*. These differences are historical actualizations of the archaic prototype of the Conqueror (hegemon). The same matrix, being exposed to different historical circumstances in a millennial process, created alterities: some seeming, others real. These alterities are a projection not only of a historical, mythical and linguistic consciousness, but also of colonial heritage and geo-political interests.

3) The fact that the Balkans is more a zone of contact than of intercivilizational conflict shows that the genesis of the conflicting "narcissism of minor differences" is a result of the supremacy of the global geopolitical perception and of the banality of Euro-Atlantic prejudice against it. "As is often the case, the Balkans are thus defined not by identity traits of their own but

by their position on the fault line, their fate predetermined by their explosive 'in-betweenness'" (Goldsworthy, 2002, p. 25).[22]

4) Mythical consciousness and historical consciousness complement each other. Sensitive places in historical consciousness encourage mythical consciousness; both history and myth are susceptible to current societal influences (K. Brown, 2000). This mythical consciousness is important for the creation of any state; however, in order for there to be institutional efficacy and regional stability, a pragmatic and empathetic historical consciousness is needed. This is illustrated by the narratives of constitutional preambles which are a synthesis of both historical and mythical consciousness. The disruption of the balance between these two types of consciousness is a certain indicator of the occurrence of the narcissism of minor differences.

5) The stereotypical representations of neighbouring countries in the Balkans, as an imagological reflection of mythical and historical consciousness, are susceptible to reconstruction and deconstruction. The evolution of the Balkans shows that an initial common cultural matrix is discernible beyond the borders of contemporary national identities. Namely, archaeology has proven that the archaic relatedness of these neighbouring cultures was dominant in the period of the "early Bronze Age up to the first political communities" (Митревски, 2021). Once-minor differences became major not so much in reality but in their perception. The portrayal of the Balkans as "savage Europe" is supported by conflicts between close Christian peoples and "neighbouring countries at war" (Todorova, 1997, p. 117). The Western European imagological codex has contributed to the propaganda of the negative stereotype of the Balkans as a "barrel of gunpowder" in all critical and crucial moments, from the 1870s until today (Мороз-Гжелак, 2006).

6) In Post-Imperial times, the officialised narcissism of minor differences continues to be a powerful generator of hegemony and brutal neighbouring conflicts. The great narcissism of minor differences is so "perfected" that it is used as a tool for revising national borders and spheres of interest. Due to this,

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[22] In the article "Historical Perspective: Yugoslavia, a Legacy of Ethnic Hatred" (19 February 1999), a journalist of the Associated Press, Jason Fields, wrote: "What has consumed the Balkans over the course of generations is the hatred of Serbs for Croats. Croats for Slovenes. Slovenes for Montenegrins. Montenegrins for Muslims. Muslims for Macedonians. Macedonians for Albanians. All these ethnic groups (who look identical to the outside world) share one thing in common: the Balkan peninsula. Finding anything else in common is a challenge" (Bjelić & Savić, 2002, p. 43, as cited in Goldsworthy, 2002, p. 26).

instead of a post-hegemonistic social ambient in the Balkans, we are witnessing a renewal of hegemony supported by new forms of cultural and identity tyranny. The archetype of the conqueror of space and identity is a transhistorical *work-in-progress*. It has multiple manifestations, the contemporary Balkan narcissism of minor differences being just one of them.

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Narcyzm małych różnic w kontekście
postimperialnego sąsiedztwa Macedonii

Konfliktowe relacje między sąsiednimi narodami na Bałkanach można bardzo trafnie wyjaśnić teorią narcyzmu małych różnic Z. Freuda. Pokrewne tożsamości w obrębie tych narodów oraz stref przygranicznych między poszczególnymi krajami były i są generatorem napięć na tle rasowym, narodowym, religijnym i kulturowym. Ilekroć dyskurs o tożsamościach ulega radykalizacji, ożywa kulturowa i polityczna hegemonia: tożsamości są szeregowane według wartości; granice są zmieniane zgodnie z tożsamością narodową; stosowane są metody przemocy fizycznej i metafizycznej; współdzielone miejsca pamięci są zawłaszczane, a te, które nie są współdzielone, są negowane. Percepcja znajduje się w kryzysie i w rezultacie sprzyja rozwojowi wzajemnego niezrozumienia, które prowadzi do konfliktów. Celem niniejszego tekstu jest demistyfikacja takich działań o charakterze hegemonicznym w sąsiednim regionie (północnej) Macedonii oraz wyartykułowanie pewnych zasad paradygmatu posthegemonistycznego.

Słowa kluczowe: narcyzm małych różnic, pogranicze, tożsamość, sąsiedztwo, pamięć niewspólna, posthegemonia, zażyłość kulturowa, rywalizacja mimetyczna, Bałkany, Macedonia Północna

The narcissism of minor differences in the context
of post-imperial Macedonian neighbouring

The conflicting relations among neighbouring nations in the Balkans may very accurately be explained by S. Freud's theory of the Narcissism of Minor Differences. Related identities among nations and the bordering zones between countries have always been and continue to be a generator of racial, national, religious and cultural tensions. Whenever the discourse of identities is radicalized, cultural and political hegemony comes to life: identities are ranked according to worth; borders are changed according to national identity; methods of physical and metaphysical violence are used; shared places of memory are appropriated, and those not shared are negated. Perception is in crisis and, as a result, promotes a kind of conflictual mutual misrecognition. This text aims to demystify such installations of hegemony in the (North) Macedonian neighbouring region, and to articulate some principles of a post-hegemonistic paradigm.

Keywords: narcissism of minor differences, border zone, identity, neighbourhood, non-shared memory, post-hegemony, cultural intimacy, mimetic rivalry, the Balkans, North Macedonia

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