

What's in a Region? Southeast European Regions Between Globalization, EU-Integration and Marginalization

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The conference in Timișoara, capital of the historical region of Banat, dealt with a topic which, according to some scholars, does not really have great relevance in our modern world of almost boundless mobility and transnational migration, of worldwide communication and virtual spaces, and of globalization permeating into all spheres of politics, economy, society and everyday life. The question was if, in view of all these “deterritorializations” that seem to render physical space almost meaningless, it made sense to devote a whole conference to the topics of “region” and “regionalism” – particularly in view of the fact that the very term “region” is so hard to define and is used in so many different ways and contexts.

The answer of the organizing committee of the International Association for Southeast European Anthropology to this question was in the positive, and the overwhelming interest of so many scholars from Southeast and West European countries in this topic was evidence that the right decision was made. The interest was instigated, we must assume, not only by the renewed attention directed to *space*, i. e., the rediscovery of territorial space which has been labelled “*spatial turn*”, but also by the fact that this renewed focus on space, and on the local and the regional in particular, appears to have become an antidote to the increasing social, economic and political acceleration, to the exasperating dynamics of globalization. As Rolf Lindner observed in as early as 1994 (Lindner 1994), there is a return to the local and to the regional,¹ both of them becoming the complementary side of globalization. Two years earlier, in 1992, the British sociologist Roland Robertson had coined the term “*glocalization*” for this phenomenon. And indeed, although many political borders have been lifted, territories and borders have again become very important – the Schengen border or the EU-borders towards Africa as well as the boundaries drawn by Samuel Huntington (1993) being only the better-known cases in point. Yet there appears to be a third important reason for the interest that refers directly to Southeast Europe, namely that its regions as well as their political, economic and socio-cultural significance have become problematic – and that for a number of reasons. These problems have been raised

¹ Cf. also Fassmann 1997, Gerdes 1980, Harvie 1994, Popović 2002, Telo 2001, Wagstaff 1994.

to the public consciousness particularly in those countries that have become members of the European Union, but they are extant in all parts of Southeast Europe.

I.

Physical space or territory, it thus appears, has not at all become irrelevant, and the *region* in particular has – in spite of or because of globalization and EU integration – become the focus of attention not only in the economy and in politics, especially EU politics with its concept of a “Europe of the Regions”, but also in several academic disciplines. However frequent and ubiquitous the use of “region” may be in everyday life, in politics or in academic discourse, it is nevertheless a very vague concept. The discussion of “region” includes, as Celia Applegate (1999: 1158) has pointed out, “little certainty and less consensus about such fundamental issues as to what we mean by the term region”. Even in geography, the discipline that deals most prominently with space, the concept of “region” is disputed and difficult to delimit, and the same holds true for such disciplines as political sciences, economics, regional planning, sociology, ethnology or history – leaving aside its use even in such disciplines as medicine (“regions of the body”), astronomy (“regions of the universe”), philosophy and psychology (“regions of the mind”), or theology (“heavenly regions”). Nevertheless, in spite of its many different uses and meanings and in spite of its vagueness both in everyday and in academic discourses, the term “region” appears to be indispensable and useful. It is useful as a practical concept of understanding, as everybody seems to know what it denotes, although most people would be hard pressed if asked to define what it means.

A closer look at the term can elucidate its meanings in everyday usage and in academic disciplines. In both discourses, “region”, which is derived from the Latin “*regio*”, i. e., direction or district, is commonly defined as a territorial unit of a certain *spatial extension*, that is, of a certain physical size. The problem is, however, that the extension of this spatial entity can be of almost any size, ranging from a few square kilometres to whole continents. For practical reasons, one can distinguish four levels of spatial dimensions that are commonly referred to by the term “region”:

1. The *micro region*. The size of the smallest kind of region is between that of the community (i. e., city, town or village) and that of the district. This kind of “region” usually denotes units of the size of a relatively small area, often the area around a city or town; for the individual, it may be the area around one’s home town. This space is important insofar as it is equivalent to the actual space of everyday interaction and experience of individuals. In this way, one speaks of the region of Belgrade or of Bucharest, of Thessalonika or of Timi-

soara. In EU terminology, this kind of region is largely equivalent to the NUTS 3² level.

2. The *meso region*. The term “region” is most frequently applied to this medium-size territory. It denotes a larger area of a size between the city or district level and the level of the nation. It often has a proper name and a history, and it exists as a concept in people’s minds. In Southeast Europe, such well-known *meso regions* are, for instance, Istria or Krajina, Sandjak, Kosovo or Vojvodina, Banat or Transylvania, Epiros or Peloponnese, Šopluk or Dobrudja, but also larger ones such as Northwest Bulgaria, Southern Albania or Central Serbia. In some cases, such as Montenegro, a meso region has become a nation of its own, while in other cases, such as Banat, Dobrudja, Thrace or Macedonia, a historical region stretches across present national boundaries. In EU terminology, this size of region is equivalent to either NUTS 1 or 2.
3. The *macro region*. The term “region” is also applied to much larger areas of a size that lies between the nation and the continent. “Southeastern Europe” or “the Balkans” are often referred to as a “European region”, very much like the “Baltic region”, “Scandinavia” or the Iberian Peninsula. In March 2007, in Zagreb, the foreign ministers of eleven Southeast European countries founded the “*Council of Regional Cooperation*” in order to improve cooperation between all Southeast European countries.³ In his famous essay, the Hungarian historian Jenő Szűcs (1985) outlined the “three *historical regions* of Europe”, i. e., three areas each of which includes large parts of Europe, and Larry Wolff (1994) described the process by which the “West” defined (and distanced from itself) “Eastern Europe” as a European region of its own, while Maria Todorova (1997) outlined the same process for the “Balkan region”.
4. Finally the *global level region*. It is certainly confusing that even very large parts of continents or areas that transcend them are called “regions”. Particularly in political discourse it is common to speak of the “Black Sea Region”, the “Mediterranean Region”, the “Gulf Region” or even the “Atlantic” or “Pacific Region”, and likewise the entire “Near East” is often referred to as a region. All of these regions range between parts of continents and the globe. It is worth noting that since the Second World War “area studies” have focussed largely on macro or global regions,⁴ a fact that has been criticized as displaying

² The acronym stands for *Nomenclature des unités territoriales statistiques*; see below.

³ <http://www.stabilitypact.org/pages/Press/detail.asp?y=2007&p=534>; Deutsche Welle, Fokus Ost-Südost, 16 May 2007. Cf. Südosteuropa Mitteilungen 47, 3 (2007) 90–93.

⁴ This finds expression, as Robert Hayden has pointed out, in a variety of interdisciplinary scholarly associations such as the Association for Asian Studies, the African Studies Association, the Middle Eastern Studies Association, the Latin American Studies Association or the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies.

a hegemonic attitude, but has also been considered a necessity in the globalizing world (cf. Appadurai 1996: 16).

From the above follow two important observations: (1) Unlike the clearly defined concepts of “community” or “nation”, “region” is always a *relative* term, a term that refers to something intermediate. Whatever its size, a region is always an entity of the “in-between”, and the concept of “region” itself is a concept “in-between”. (2) Any given territory can belong to several levels of region at the same time, one of them overlaying the other.

II.

While the term “region” is applied to all four above-mentioned levels, in most academic disciplines it usually refers to *micro* regions or, most frequently, to *meso* regions; and in most countries, particularly in Southeast Europe, this kind of “region” is almost synonymous to “rural region”.

As diverse as the spatial dimensions are, so too are the theoretical approaches to the phenomenon. In geography, the discipline for which “region” is at the very centre of attention, the “realistic” approach to the region prevailed from the nineteenth century until the 1980s. This approach was based on the idea that regions are “containers” in which all physical-geographic and human elements form a kind of “natural” whole (Wardenga/Miggelbrink 1998: 35). In the 1990s, this “essentialist” view of the region gave way to an approach that perceived the region predominantly or even exclusively as a *social construct*. The geographers Peter Weichhart and Hans Blotevogel considered the region even as a “double construct”: on the one hand, it is a “mental construct of science”, and on the other hand regions are “to a very large extent the result of human actions and insofar historical and social constructs”, or “cognitive constructs of the everyday world” (Weichhart 1996: 36 f.). For the geographic study of the spatial organisation or of the distribution and interrelation of certain elements, the term was consequently used as a category of description and analysis, for which the authors developed the terms “structural region” (“*Strukturregion*”) and “integrative region” (“*Verflechtungsregion*”). As for the level of everyday life and discourse, regions are, on the one hand, seen as “regions of activity of economic and political-administrative organisations” which are “constituted by the actions of people (individuals, groups) and by social organisations (enterprises, associations, administrative bodies)” (Blotevogel 1996: 59). On the other hand, regions are constituted and reproduced by communicative processes and are thus *mental constructs* of spatial entities, either as “perceived regions” (“*Wahrnehmungsregionen*”) or as “identity regions” (“*Identitätsregionen*”) as expressions of the ingroup feelings of social

groups. It is the latter type of region that can, under certain conditions, also become a “frame of reference of *active regionalism*”.

It was somewhat surprising for a discipline like geography that physical space was reduced to just one out of many factors and was almost lost sight of; it was the above-mentioned “*spatial turn*” that brought real space, its physical qualities and limitations back in and put an end to radical constructivist approaches. The present view of “region” is a combination of both approaches, taking the “real qualities” of a given territory, its social constructedness and the social concepts about it into consideration. In other words, the factors that constitute and define a region can be both natural and human, both real and mental.

III.

But what are, in practice, the factors or *criteria* that turn a stretch of land into a “region”. As a matter of fact, *any one* criterion can in principle suffice to make a “region”, so that Rudolf Hrbek and Sabine Weyand (1994: 15) and other authors define “region” as a territory characterized by homogeneity in at least one specific aspect that differentiates and delimits it from other territories. In other words, the very concept of “region” is based on (real or perceived) internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. The number of possible differentiating criteria is very large, and it makes sense to divide them into two groups, namely the so-called “hard” or “objective” criteria, and the “soft” or “subjective” ones. In almost any case, however, one can note an interplay or a combination of various factors in the constitution of a region.

The *hard* or objective criteria concern the tangible features, functions and factors that can shape a “region” and set it apart from others. Thus, a region can be defined and delimited by its sheer natural *morphology*, by plains and mountain ranges, by rivers and seas, by marshes and deserts. It can furthermore be defined by its predominant *economy*, for example by pastoralism, certain trades or industries, by its *infrastructure* or by its predominant means of transportation (e.g. river transport). In very many cases, “regions” are *politically* defined, that is, they are units of government or administration. Furthermore, a common *history* or historical experience can form a region, and likewise so can *social* factors such as religion, language, dialect, ethnicity or folk culture be differentiating criteria that constitute a region. In the 1920s, it was the principal goal of the school of “Culture Area Research” that was founded in Germany to determine “objective” culture regions or culture areas on the basis of *folk culture*, which resulted in large atlas projects in Europe (cf. Wiegmann 1968) and in the United States (cf. Rooney 1982).

The *soft* or subjective criteria, on the other hand, are intangible, but they are by no means less important than the “hard” ones. For the individual or the group, the “region” around them is their space of daily life and experience (*alltäglicher Erfahrungsraum*), a space of intensive social interaction, of networks and bonding. Such subjectively defined or constructed regions are spatial expressions of social or mental facts, offering the individual or the group not only a degree of familiarity and security, as Ina-Maria Greverus (1972, 1979) has pointed out, but also a sense of belonging, both spatially (my “home region”, “*Heimat*”) and socially (“my people”). These subjective definitions constitute the above-mentioned “identity regions”,⁵ giving expression to feelings of belonging and attachment, to people’s “sense of region”.

Closely related to this dichotomy of “hard” and “soft” criteria is yet another important distinction that concerns the constitution or *formation* of regions. Having in mind both the “realistic” and the “constructivist” approaches, one can discern three different ways in which regions are constituted: they can be either “given”, “grown” or “intentionally formed” – or a mixture of the three.

1. A “*given*” region would be a territory that is clearly defined through natural boundaries. Islands (such as Crete), peninsulas (such as Istria) or valleys between mountain ranges (such as the Rose Valley in Bulgaria) are such “natural” regions. But one must be careful, because the importance of natural boundaries is often overrated: rivers, for instance, can divide territories, as is the case with the Danube between Romania and Bulgaria (cf. Roth 1997), but they can also unite them, as is the case in the Upper Rhine Valley between France, Germany and Switzerland.
2. A “*grown*” region denotes a territory that has, on the basis of hegemonic, administrative, economic, structural, social or ethnic factors, through a historical process grown into a region – and is perceived as such by the people living in and around it. In many cases there is an initial element of forceful construction such as wars and hegemony: the Ottoman conquest shaped new regions, and likewise the Westphalian Treaty of 1648 established the principle of “*cuius regio – eius religio*” and thereby created many new regions, but in both cases most of these constructs became, in the course of time, unquestioned realities and people developed a sense of belonging and identity.

Most of the historical or traditional regions have no exact boundaries. They can be called “*informal*” regions which are characterized by intense communication, social relations and economic interactions. Experience shows that even after longer periods of separation by national borders or political systems, the local populations re-establish the traditional ties as soon as the borders are open again;

⁵ Cf. Becker 2005, Cole 1999, Giordano 1999, 2000, Kappus 1999, Lindner 1994, Weichhart 1990.

the western and southern border regions of Bulgaria are good cases in point, as Galia Valchinova (2003) and Ivaylo Ditchev (2005) have demonstrated.

3. "*Intentionally formed*" or "*formal*" regions are of a different kind. Their size and borders are always clearly defined. It is true that throughout history, regions and borders have always been constructed and shifted for hegemonic or administrative purposes: the Ottoman Empire was divided into administrative *vilayets* and *sandjaks*, and the Habsburg Empire also had fixed administrative regions. But never before in history have there been more systematic and radical attempts at subjecting territories to rational control and mastery than in the last two centuries. This policy of rational regional planning reached the Balkan Peninsula in the nineteenth century as part of the nation building processes, and here it is important to note that the model that was adopted already by the Ottoman Empire in the mid-nineteenth century and later by all young Balkan nations was the *centralist French model* which grants very little power to the regions, and not the federal model which grants the traditional provinces and regions much more autonomy. As a consequence, all new Southeast European nations divided their territories into politically weak and fully dependent administrative units, similar to the French prefectures, and often disregarded grown historical regions.

The purposeful creation and re-creation of formal territorial units – and the disregard of traditional, informal regions – was even stronger in the socialist countries (with the exception of Yugoslavia), where it was a direct result of conscious, politically motivated efforts of the communist regimes to centralize power and to maintain full control on all levels.⁶ It was only logical that these administrative regions never took hold in, and remained almost meaningless for, the majority of the population. Bulgaria may be an extreme case, but it is nevertheless indicative that after the first establishment of administrative regions in 1880 the entire regional structure of the country was radically changed in 1887, 1901, 1934, 1944, 1947, 1948, 1959 and 1971 (Enciklopedija Bălgarija 1978, vol. 1: 37–39). This clearly demonstrates that for the central government the division of the country into regions was determined almost exclusively by its political interests.

This approach to regional policy in some Balkan countries is certainly extreme, but it is not at all unique. In modern nations, intentionally constructed or formal regions are an indispensable basis for regional and infrastructure politics and planning, so that the geographer Hans Blotvogel (1991) can call the region a "goal-oriented spatial construct". In this tradition of regional planning, the European Union has established two systems of regional structures, namely (1) on the

⁶ In the GDR, for instance, the powerful traditional provinces (*Länder*) were dissolved and 16 weak districts (*Bezirke*) were established; after German unification, the old provinces were immediately re-established.

national and sub-national level the NUTS, i.e., *Nomenclature des unités territoriales statistiques* or *Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics*, that was introduced in the EU in 1980, and (2) on the supranational level of the EU and its neighbours a large number of “Euro-Regions”, i.e., cross-border regions stretching into two, three or more countries.⁷

While the first ones were established for purposes of statistics, administration and planning in order to make the EU countries comparable and to facilitate the allocation of regional funds, the latter ones aim at overcoming national boundaries and at creating a more federally structured “Europe of the Regions”. So, while the first ones are meant to be a tool for politicians, administrators and planners and need no acceptance by the population, the latter, in order to fulfill their proclaimed political goal, have to be accepted by the population and should ideally become “informal regions”. The experience of the “old” EU countries has shown, however, that many of these (highly subsidised) Euro-Regions never really came to full life, and that only those that coincide with traditional regions have had a chance to thrive.

In some cases formal and informal regions overlap, but they rarely coincide. While the formal regions are easy to grasp and have well-defined boundaries, the informal ones have fuzzy boundaries and their definition is often quite subjective and vague. And while the formal regions have, as Blotevogel put it, a specific goal or primary *function*, the functions of the informal regions are multiple and complex. Therefore the categorizations of regions based on function that are offered in the literature are not consistent. Nobert Hölcker (2004: 13), for instance, distinguishes between four different functional types of region, namely the administrative, the economic, the social and the cultural region. The first two of them largely coincide with formal regions, while the latter two relate more to informal regions. As all of them are relevant for Southeast Europe, I will briefly discuss them.

1. The *administrative, political* and planning regions are the most clearly delimited territorial units, as they have legally sanctioned political and administrative borders. While these regions are the concern of political sciences, government administration, law, regional planning or geography, they are rarely, if ever, studied by ethnologists. As mentioned above, these formal administrative units in Southeast Europe are formed on the model of the French prefectures, a fact that is particularly obvious in Romania. In all new EU member countries, the existing administrative units were integrated into the European NUTS-system which, for the sake of harmonization, defines four levels of regions, namely NUTS 0 = nation states, NUTS 1 = larger regions/parts of nations, NUTS 2 = mid-size regions/districts, and NUTS 3 = small regions/cities. Bulgaria, for

⁷ On Euro-Regions see e.g. Bauer-Wolf 2005, Blask 2003, Hrbek/Weyand 1994, Ilies 2004, Knemeyer 1994, Ruge 2003, Sempft 1995.

example, is divided into two NUTS 1, six NUTS 2 regions (*rajoni*), and 28 NUTS 3 regions (*oblasti*). One must not forget, though, that in spite of (or maybe because of) the centralist policy of the Southeast European governments these administrative units are nevertheless spaces of political action, for example in elections, and sometimes spaces of opposition to the political centre or of active regionalism.

2. The *economic* regions are often closely related to administrative regions, but they do not have to, and they are less formal. Depending on regional policies, legal regulations, taxes, border and customs regimes, etc., they can transcend administrative regions. Their boundaries are more flexible and vague, as they are defined by economic factors and policies. Economic regions are in the focus of economics, economic geography and tourism research which focus, among other things, on regional economic networks and interrelations, on the development of tourism or regional products (cf. Ermann 2005), and on regional cooperation and networking as a means to survive the pressures of global competition. Ethnology has so far touched economic regions only in studies of traditional regional economies (such as agriculture, pastoralism, crafts) and their socio-cultural consequences, more recently also in studies of tourism (cf. Pöttler 1994, Rolshoven 2005) and in efforts to market regional products such as folk art or food. In the European Union, economic regions gain in relevance because of their attempts to gain the legal protection of their regional trademarks. Can real *feta* cheese be produced in Denmark and sold under this name? For Greece, this is a question that has both economic and identificational implications. Ethnology should definitely take an active interest in this interplay of regional economy and identity.
3. Only over the last decade has the *social* region become an object of study of such disciplines as demography, sociology, geography, history, political sciences and ethnology. Social regions usually have the size of micro regions (NUTS 3), and they can be both *informal* or *formal* regions, depending on the perspectives and goals of practitioners or scholars: demographic or social data are usually available for *formal* regions, so that researchers prefer to make these their field of study. But the *informal* nature of social regions is more relevant than their formal aspects: On the one hand, they are the living spaces of social groups (defined by language or dialect, ethnicity, religion, class or typical economy), and the space of their collective social and political experience, of their “typical” social interactions and relations, and – very importantly – of their marriage circles. On the other hand, they are the spaces of their collective identity, which is often based on their opposition to external forces such as the national capital. This opposition is particularly strong in those European regions that are (or feel to be) *peripheral* and cut off from resources. In these cases the *spatial periphery* is identical with *social periphery*, an inter-

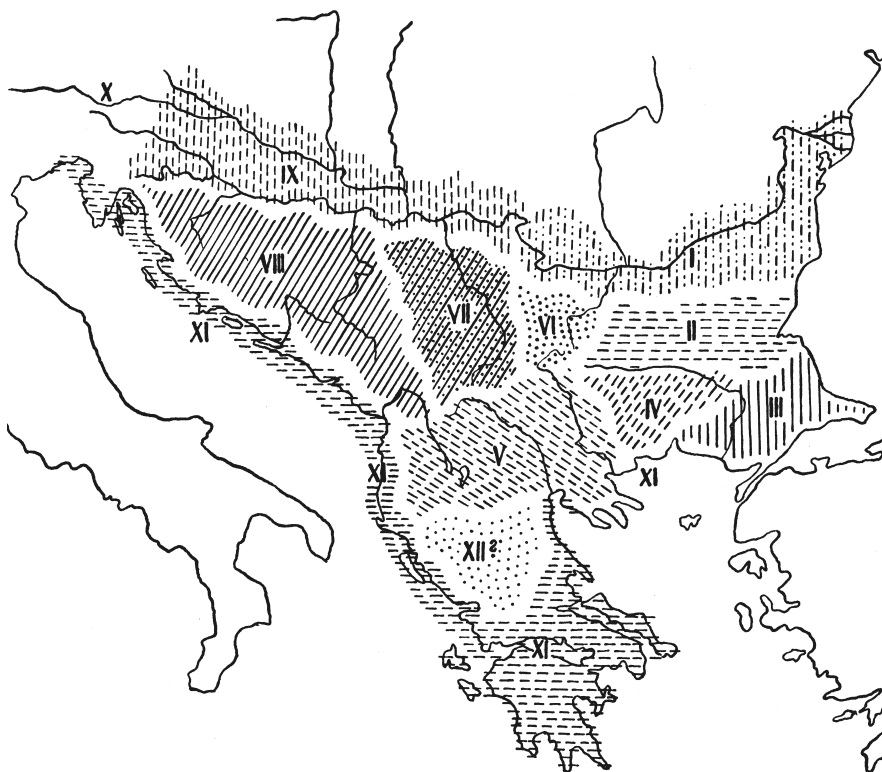
dependence between space and social class that has only recently become a topic of sociological research in Europe.⁸

4. The *cultural* regions are of course the most elusive, as they seem to exist largely in the eyes of the beholder. "Culture Area Research" attempted to overcome this problem and to objectify culture areas or regions by systematically comparing and mapping tangible forms and styles of folk culture. The method was applied to Southeast Europe by the cultural geographer Otto Maull (1938) and by ethnologists such as Milovan Gavazzi (1958) and Christo Vakarelski (1969). The Croatian ethnologist Gavazzi determined twelve larger culture regions on the basis of their traditional material culture, their food ways, customs, dialects, verbal traditions, etc. (Map No. 1), most of which cross national borders. Although the method of "Culture Area Research" was applied in several European countries and even in the United States (see Rooney 1982) and produced impressive atlases, it has to be remarked critically that it focussed on the dominant ethnic groups, excluding the cultural diversity of ethnic, religious and social groups, and it did not account for culture change, particularly for the change caused by modernization and by the homogenizing cultural policies of the nation states. This approach to cultural regions has therefore largely given way to constructivist concepts which focus more on *subjective* definitions of cultural regions based on collective and individual feelings of belonging and identity. There is good reason to apply these concepts even in our time of increased mobility, particularly of rural-urban migration, because for most people their home region still remains their predominant or exclusive space of everyday action and experience, of identity and stability in a fast changing world. This focus on the "own" region, however, inevitably contributes to the delimitation of the "others", both in everyday life and in research. It has to be added that objective and subjective cultural regions are a topic not only of the ethnological sciences, but also of dialect studies, cultural geography and architecture.

IV.

The interest of ethnologists in Southeast European regions and their problems has so far been quite limited. Both foreign anthropology and native ethnography or folklore have largely been locally oriented. While the *village* community has received a lot of attention from both native and foreign researchers ever since the Romanian "monographical method" (cf. Mihăilescu 1998) or Irwin Sanders' study of a "Balkan Village" (Sanders 1949), and even the *city* has meanwhile become a

⁸ In June 2007, a sociological conference in Rostock, Germany, was devoted to this problem.



Map No. 1: The Culture Geographic Regions of Southeast Europe (from Gavazzi 1958: 12). I East-Danube Region, II Balkan Region, III Thracian Region, IV Rhodope Region, V Macedonian Region, VI Šop Region, VII Morava Region, VIII Dinaric Region, IX Pannonian Region, X East Alpine Region, XI Mediterranean Region (north, central and south Adriatic, Ionian-Aegean), XII Intermediate Region (southern Albania, Epiros, Pindos)

focus of ethnological research⁹, the *region* has only been used as an unquestioned locale of field studies either of folk culture in general¹⁰ or of such aspects as

⁹ Cf. vols. 9 and 10 of *Ethnologia Balkanica* which are exclusively devoted to urban life and culture in Southeast Europe.

¹⁰ See e. g. the volumes by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences on the folk culture of Bulgarian regions such as Pirinski kraj. *Etnografski, folklorni i ezikovi proučvanija* [Pirin region. Ethnographic, folkloristic and linguistic studies]. Sofia: BAN 1980; Plovdivski kraj. *Etnografski i ezikovi proučvanija* [Plovdiv region. Ethnographic and linguistic studies]. Sofia: BAN 1986; Sofijski kraj. *Etnografski i ezikovi proučvanija* [Sofia region. Ethnographic and linguistic studies]. Sofia: BAN 1993.

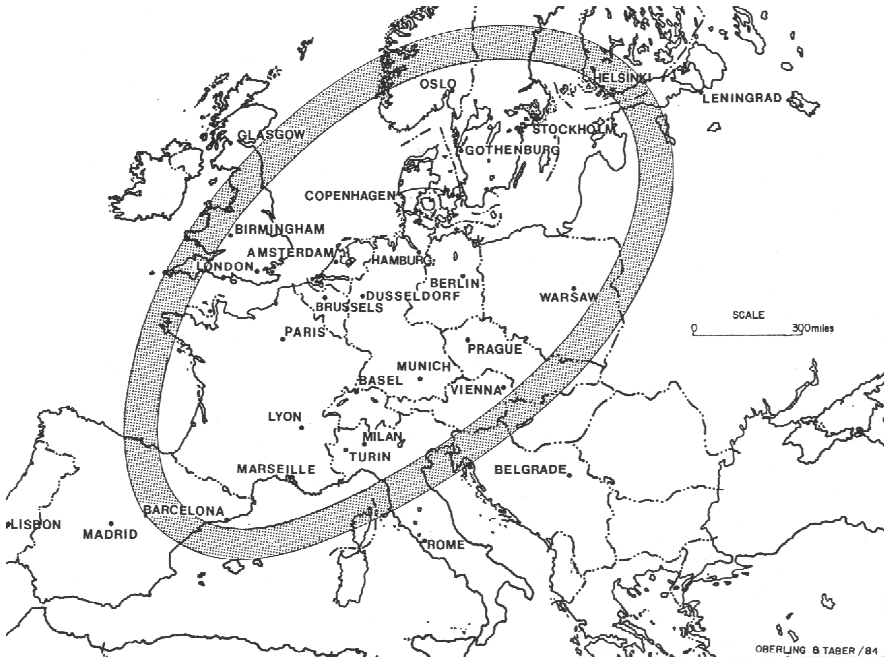
material culture, customs, epic traditions or narrating¹¹. Apart from the above-mentioned works of Gavazzi (1958) and Vakarelski (1969), the “region” as such has not yet been problematised, nor have the specific political, economic, structural or socio-cultural problems of Southeast European regions been explicitly addressed from an ethnological perspective. In view of the processes of *glocalization* and increasing regional disparities, the ethnological sciences should therefore direct their attention to the actual developments in Southeast European regions. This means, that on the basis of sound ethnographic research, ethnologists should study the socio-cultural dimensions of all types of regions, including the formal administrative and economic ones and also the Euro-Regions. By studying them they can

- help determine informal regions, their culture, and the changes they undergo,
- help investigate the (objective and subjective) relations between the inhabitants and their region as well as between regions and the national centres of power,
- elucidate the extant normative and descriptive definitions and concepts of “region” in the Southeast European context before the background of EU definitions and concepts,
- but most of all address the problems of Southeast European regions and maybe even contribute to their solution (e. g. as consultants).

And problems there are in the regions of southeastern Europe. They are visible and palpable to anyone travelling through Southeast Europe with open eyes. Many of them are, or should be, the concern of politicians, administrators, regional planners or geographers, but there are just as many that concern the ethnological sciences. It goes without saying that several problems are the same as in other parts of Europe or the world, and here the ethnologist working in Southeast Europe should look at the wider European context and evaluate the international research literature.¹² Some problems, however, appear to have a specific nature or dimension on the Balkan Peninsula, mostly due to its historical legacy. Before the background of globalization, the expansion of the European Union and its goal of a *Europe of the Regions*, we must ask what the state of Southeast European regions is and what their most pressing problems are. Based on my personal experience, on literature and on sources such as the media, I want to discuss three aspects which I consider to be most relevant for ethnology.

¹¹ See e. g. the volume by D. Daskalova, D. Dobрева, J. Koceva, E. Minčeva: *Narodna proza ot Blagoevgradski okrąg* [Folk prose from Blagoevgrad region]. Sofia 1985 (= SbNU 58).

¹² See e. g. Giordano 1999, 2000, Götttsch 2000, Jöhler 2004, Köstlin 2005, Leimgruber 2005, Maase 1998, Pöttler 1994, Rolshoven 2005, Schilling/Ploch 1995.



Map No. 2: Core and Periphery in Europe (from Cole 1985: 9)

1. The increase in regional disparities

Ever since Ottoman times and the establishment of nation states, the Southeast European countries have been plagued by a number of sharp disparities or dichotomies. The fundamental one lies in the fact that since the development of the “world system” in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries (cf. Wallerstein 1974, 1980) and the gradual decline of the Ottoman Empire from the early eighteenth century onward, the entire Balkan Peninsula became a region that was peripheral to the European centres, a disparity that has been studied from an anthropological perspective by John Cole (1985) (see Map No. 2). This historical dichotomy between European centres and the southeastern periphery continued throughout the twentieth century and was even exacerbated by the policy of the socialist regimes to integrate their countries into the “Eastern bloc” and to isolate them from the West. Today, this marginalization has its consequences not only in the fact that the GNP of the Southeast European EU members is the lowest in the EU, but also in the fact that virtually all regions with the weakest economies in the EU are located on the Balkan Peninsula; while in 1998, eight out of the ten weakest regions in the EU were in Greece (Vorauer 1998: 101), in 2007 twelve of the fifteen weakest regions were located in Bulgaria and Romania (see Table below).

Regions with the highest/lowest GDP per inhabitant in 2007¹³
(in PPS¹⁴, EU-27 average of 2004 = 100%, EU = 268 NUTS 2 regions)

<i>Regions with the highest GDP per inhabitant</i>	GDP per inhabitant in percent of the EU-27 average	<i>Regions with the lowest GDP per inhabitant</i>	GDP per inhabitant in percent of the EU-27 average
Inner London (UK)	302.9	Vest (RO)	39.0
Luxemburg (LU)	251.0	Podlaskie (PL)	37.9
Region of Brussels (BE)	248.3	Centru (RO)	35.5
Hamburg (DE)	195.2	Podkarpackie (PL)	35.4
Vienna (AT)	179.7	Lubelskie (PL)	35.2
Île de France (FR)	174.5	Nord-Vest (RO)	33.0
Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire (UK)	173.8	Sud-Est (RO)	30.7
Upper Bavaria (DE)	169.3	Jugoiztočen (BG)	29.9
Stockholm (SE)	165.7	Severoiztočen (BG)	29.3
Utrecht (NL)	157.7	Sud-Vest Oltenia (RO)	28.8
Darmstadt (DE)	157.3	Sud-Muntenia (RO)	28.4
Prague (CZ)	157.1	Severen centralen (BG)	26.4
Southern and Eastern (IE)	156.5	Južen centralen (BG)	25.6
Bremen (DE)	155.8	Severozapaden (BG)	25.6
NE Scotland (UK)	153.9	Nord-Est (RO)	23.6

Within the peripheral Southeast European macro region, there is yet another, a *second periphery*. The strong political focus on modernization and urban development ever since the late nineteenth century created a sharp dichotomy between developing *urban* regions and lagging behind *rural* regions. The neglect of the rural regions grew in the early twentieth century and it further increased in the socialist period, when the focus was on heavy industries, collectivization of agriculture and rapid urbanization.¹⁵ In the 1990s, the impact of capitalism and globalization, combined with inadequate national policies (Creed 1995), increased the disparities between the urban centres and the rural peripheries even further:

¹³ http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ity_offpub/KS-SF-07-104/EN/KS-SF-07-104-en.pdf.

¹⁴ PPS = purchasing power standards.

¹⁵ The rapid influx of village dwellers into the cities resulted in the “rurbanization” of south-east European cities, i. e., urbanization with strong rural elements (cf. Roth 1985, Prošić-Dvornić 1992).

Almost all Southeast European countries are today characterized by a sharp disparity between relatively strong and flourishing metropolitan regions and economically weak and backward rural regions which lack any adequate infrastructure,¹⁶ many of which are depopulated or even devastated. They form both spatial and social peripheries which are “peripheries of the periphery” or “double peripheries” (cf. Axt 1997, Hofer 1987).

There are, of course, similar developments in many European countries (cf. Blotevogel 1997, Giordano 1994) and in North America, but the size of the problem on the Balkan Peninsula appears to be much larger. The growing discrepancy between developing and devastated regions in Southeast Europe has eminent social and cultural consequences (see Maier 2007). The almost empty peripheral regions with primitive agriculture and devastated villages are becoming more and more the refuge of ethnic minorities,¹⁷ usually of Roma, or of the economically deprived, for example old-age pensioners surviving on subsistence agriculture and with “archaic cultural models” (Benovska-Săbkova 1995). In recent years, and increasingly with the EU accession, one can notice yet another development: more and more old-age pensioners from Western Europe buy houses – and sometimes whole villages – and repopulate regions that have been largely deserted by their original populations.

In the EU, the most important counter measures were and still are the funding of the improvement of the regional infrastructure and economy. In the 1980s and 1990s, Greece profited largely from this policy (cf. Lauth-Bacas 2004), but today there is less EU money available, and in the new member countries there seems to be less know-how and experience to acquire these funds¹⁸ and more high-level corruption, as the progress reports of the EU Commission indicate. Other measures taken by the EU, by national governments, regional administrations, local authorities, and NGOs are the establishment and support of nature parks¹⁹ and of tourism, especially “soft” village tourism, but it is very likely that the regional disparities will continue to grow in the foreseeable future.

¹⁶ Cf. the keynote address by Robert M. Hayden on “Highways, Roadblocks and Empires” for the conference on “Building the Balkans Anew: From Metaphor to Market,” University of Illinois at Urbana, Champaign, Sept. 21, 2007.

¹⁷ In Bulgaria, for example, only 26,5% of the ethnic Bulgarians, but 63,1% of the ethnic Turks and 46,2% Roma live in villages (Genov 2007: 90); cf. also Aschauer 2007.

¹⁸ In the summer of 2007, for example, radio reports indicated that Bulgarian wine-growing farmers were largely unable to file applications for EU funds for lack of know-how; the largest part of the funds earmarked for Bulgarian farmers remained unused.

¹⁹ Most of these parks and reserves were established in the framework of the EU’s “Natura 2000” programme, a European network of areas protected on the basis of the Flora-Fauna-Habitat Directive of 1992.

In view of these rather dramatic developments, ethnologists should direct their attention to the abandoned regions, but this time not in search of relics and survivals of “ancient” or “authentic” folk traditions, but rather to the socio-cultural consequences of the economic and demographic processes. These consequences include the shrinking of settlements and populations (cf. Becker 2005), regressive processes in everyday culture, the dying out of ethnic cultures (cf. Barna/Lönnqvist 2000 on the Banat region) or their replacement by other ethnic cultures, the growing “culture of the elderly”, or the adaptation of new populations, e. g. Western old-age pensioners, to their new places of residence and their interactions with the local population. Worthy of ethnographic attention are also the political and economic attempts to turn the tide, for example through the production and marketing of regional products (with the help of EU subsidies or protection of trademarks), or the “folklorization” of such regions for domestic or international tourists.

2. From powerlessness to empowerment?

As mentioned above, the administrative regions of the new nation states were – and still continue to be – powerless and dependent on the strong power centres in the national capitals. With the partial exception of Yugoslavia, regional autonomy or any kind of self-determination or self-governance were impossible, so that the regions as well as the local communities remained in a state of almost complete dependency and non-responsibility. This in turn created a strong opposition between “us” and “them”, between the weak periphery and the overpowering centre which, in the eyes of the people in the “province”, was corrupt, abused its power, and totally neglected the rural regions. In Bulgaria, this political tradition of disregard and even contempt of the “backward” villages and regions continued after 1990, leading to catastrophic results (Creed 1995), with little change even after EU accession. It is hardly surprising that one of the basic political principles of the EU, the principle of “subsidiarity”, is very difficult to implement in South-east Europe. The principle demands that each political-administrative unit (from the village community up to the national government) should take care of *all* the matters that it can manage except for those that fall in the responsibility of the next higher administrative level. It is obvious that this federalist principle²⁰ grants a lot of local and regional autonomy and self-determination, but runs counter to the centralist structure of Southeast European countries.

For the outside observer it is striking that people in the “province” complain a lot about the capital and at the same time put up with their situation. They would

²⁰ Cf. Rose 2001, Sidjanski 2000, Vitzthum 2000.

rather try to escape their rural region and migrate to the urban centres or straight to the West as soon as they have the opportunity. Of course there is some identification with the region and interest in regional history and culture, and there are regional studies by local historians or ethnographers,²¹ but this regional interest or regionalism is considerably lower than in West and Central European countries. Accordingly, there are few movements for *political regionalism*, i. e., for greater self-determination. If regions are less important in Southeast Europe, at least in the formerly Ottoman territories, it is worth asking for the reasons. A likely explanation could be that as a consequence of the Ottoman way of rule, the focus of life and of all social activities were – and largely continue to be – the smaller social units of the family, the kinship group and the village community (and maybe a few neighbouring settlements). The larger territorial or political units were governed by foreign Ottoman officials, so that an identification with the region could hardly develop. In view of this, the choice of the centralist French model of regional administration and the relatively low level of political regionalism, federalism or separatism was probably a logical consequence. It is worth noting that most regions striving for more autonomy within the national state²² belong to that part of Southeast Europe that once was part of the Habsburg Empire.

It is the prevalent focus on village and kinship ties, the political powerlessness of the regions, and the resulting low regional cohesion that have – in conjunction with macro political and economic factors – contributed to the bleeding out of rural regions and to the excessive growth of urban conglomerations such as Athens (where over one third of all Greeks live!), Bucharest, Belgrade, Sofia or Istanbul. The opposition of the periphery against the centre is strong, but it is a silent and resigned one. The attitude towards the capital is characterized by a general “*culture of public mistrust*”, as Christian Giordano (2007) phrased it. The central government and all its institutions are viewed as the centres of corruption and mismanagement, and all mishap is blamed on them. Today, this criticism includes the way in which EU regional funds are allocated: officials in the capital are alleged to take ten or even twenty per cent in bribes or channel the funds to their relatives or friends (cf. Petrova 2006).

Although political counter action in the form of *political regionalism* is quite unlikely, there appears to be a growing *symbolic* or *nostalgic* revaluation of the regional and the local. This emerging *symbolic regionalism* derives largely from the strong kinship ties of most new urbanites to the places of origin of their families and kin and their nostalgia for “wholesome” village life vis-à-vis the disturbing effects of modernization, urbanization and globalization. In the last years,

²¹ In Bulgaria, for example, there is a lot of literature on local and regional history and culture (“*kraevedstvo*”), most of it written by devoted laymen.

²² Montenegro, Kosovo, and the Republica Srpska are striving for, or have achieved, nationhood.

more and more city dwellers renovate the old village houses of their family or build new ones and spend their summer holidays in the region; regional or village tourism has become increasingly popular, as more and more historical and ethnographic museums have been opened and regional folklore festivals have greatly increased in number and popularity. The villages and regions make ever greater efforts to attract visitors with all kinds of old and new festivals and the sale of regional products, so that one can speak of a “musealization” and “festivalization” of rural regions and communities. It seems that the peripheral regions are becoming – as a kind of secondary development – the focus of nostalgic identification of the new urbanites, who as migrants to the big cities (or abroad) organize themselves in associations based on village or town origin (e.g. in Greece or Bulgaria) or on regional origin (*hemşer*, in Turkey), a kind of *regionalism by proxy*. They will get regional food from their relatives back in the village or buy the increasing number of “genuine” regional products; the advertizing industry has in any case discovered this new market. This sentimental return to the village or the region is certainly a “strategy of the powerless”, but it can also create sentiments directed against the national capital or against “Brussels” which can be tapped by populist politicians.

On the other hand, one can observe a growing tendency that this regionalism leads to civic action, e.g. engagement for the protection of the natural habitat of the rural regions. Local and regional opposition to large and damaging infrastructural projects of big business or the government is supported by concerned citizens and NGOs in the cities, a new development that may lead to some degree of regional empowerment. All these developments are, in any case, important research topics for ethnologists or folklorists.

3. Transcending regional and national borders

Any definition of a region, be it a popular, political or scientific one, by necessity defines boundaries, and with that territories and people that do *not* belong to it. The vagueness of the boundaries of informal regions inevitably provokes the question of where a given region ends and where the neighbouring region begins. Regions are, in other words, also about inclusion and exclusion, about “us” and the “others”. The spatial boundaries are reifications of social boundaries. And like every villager has stereotypical images of the people living in the next villages, in the same way people in any given region have images of themselves and of their neighbouring regions (cf. Hönnighausen 2000) which are often expressed in popular narrative forms such as sayings, slurs or jokes. In some cases there are even “regional characters” such as those of the *Šopi* in Bulgaria, the *Herzegovinians* in former Yugoslavia, or the *Cretans* in Greece.

Because of the vagueness of informal regions there is always a space “in-between”, an intermediate or hybrid space of neither–nor which incorporates elements of both regions. It is marginal to both, but at the same time it is an important space of exchange and contact. This is particularly evident in regions that are located on national borders or even cross them. Such regions have always functioned as spaces of economic, social and cultural exchange between countries, particularly when the same language is spoken on both sides of the border, and in many cases there are special agreements between governments to facilitate the free flow of people, goods and services between these border regions²³. It is this tradition that the European Union wants to continue and to strengthen by establishing and supporting trans-border Euro-Regions that make the national borders more permeable. Based on local or regional initiatives, trans-border regions were established in eastern and southeastern Europe even before EU accession, and there are more Euro-Regions to come. Meanwhile there are seventeen Euro-Regions that include Southeast European countries (see table), and there are plans to establish others. In 2007 Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey agreed to establish the Euro-Region “Trakia”, but Bulgarian newspapers complained²⁴ that the Greek side was the least enthusiastic partner.

Euro-Regions in Southeast Europe²⁵

<i>Name of Euro-Region</i>	<i>participating countries</i>
Adriatic Euroregion	AL BiH HR SM SL I
Carpathian Euroregion (Carpath. Foundation)	HU PL RO SK UA
Danube 21 Euroregion	BG RO SM
Danube-Drava-Sava	HU HR BiH
Danube-Kris-Mures-Tisza (DKMT)	HU RO SM
Drina-Sava-Majevisa	BiH SM
Euregio Steiermark – Slovenija	SL AT
Euroregion Danube 21	BG RO SM
Euroregion Belasica	BG RO SM
Ister-Granum Euroregion	HU SK
Lower Danube (Dunarea de Jos)	RO MO UA
Nestos-Mesta Euroregion	BG GR

²³ For the exchange in the Serbian-Romanian border region, see Radu 2007. For the regions on the Serbian-Bulgarian border there were in socialist times special privileges for the local population to cross the otherwise strictly closed and guarded border.

²⁴ See, for example, the daily *Sega* of April 26, 2007, p. 14.

²⁵ On the Romanian Euro-Regions see Ilies 2004.

<i>Name of Euro-Region</i>	<i>participating countries</i>
Niš-Skopje-Sofia Euroregion (Eurobalkans)	BG MK SM
Prespa/Ohrid Euroregion (Cultural Triangle)	GR MK AL
Siret-Prut-Nistru	RO MO
Upper Prut (Prutul de Sus)	RO MO UA
West Pannonia Euroregion	AT HU
<i>planned</i> : Euroregion Trakia	BG GR TR

SM = Serbia and Montenegro

Many Euro-Regions all over the EU have only a formal existence, i. e., in the actions of politicians, administrators, regional planners or economists, and only relatively few of them have really been accepted by the local population, usually those that had already been informal regions before (cf. Böttger 2006). Given the strong centralist tradition of the Southeast European countries and the reluctance of their governments to share power, there is good reason to be sceptical about the future of the Southeast European Euro-Regions. But whatever the outcome, the processes of their acceptance or rejection as well as the possible changes in everyday behaviours and the management of identities should be closely observed by ethnologists. The studies of Elke-Nicole Kappus (1999) and Pamela Ballinger (2004) of the region of Istria, which is part of the Adriatic Euroregion, have already produced fine results.

The present paper could touch only on some of the questions that concern the regions of Southeast Europe. Many more will be addressed in the papers of this volume whose main objective is to direct the attention of ethnologists, anthropologists, folklorists, sociologists and historians to the regions of the Balkan Peninsula and to the problems which they face in our time of EU integration and globalization.

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