

## CUISINE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN BALKANS

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During the last decade or so, the existence of a Balkan cultural identity has been hotly debated in books, articles, conferences, and other scholarly practices. It has been argued that the cuisine, supposedly common throughout the Balkan Peninsula, might be a form through which this cultural identity manifests itself. Using statistical data regarding the diet components over the last 20 years, this paper attempts to evaluate how valid the notion of a common Balkan cuisine is. There are two hypotheses I am trying to test: 1) there is a commonly shared diet structure in Balkan area, and 2) people consume similar quantities of basic food. Although these hypotheses are considerably weaker than that of the existence of a "Balkan cuisine", it seems to me that they are the means of doing the most of the available data. The conclusions will point to the fact that, if "Balkan cuisine" means what people eat in this region on a daily basis, then there is a very limited specificity and coherence of food consumption in Balkan countries.

### **Is there such a thing as a "Balkan" region?**

There is a generally human, permanent need for grouping things together in order to understand them. It is a truism to say that this need manifests itself in the study of Eastern Europe, too. The 1990's political changes in the communist block ruled out the nicely packed idea of a world divided into East and West, communist and capitalist, centralized and free-market economies. There is no longer a clear-cut manner of grouping together the former communist countries: some of them are now rich and became part of the European Union, whereas others are still poor and hardly surviving the transition to a free-market system. So some other ways of grouping these countries were to be employed. This must be one of the reasons why former "Eastern Europe" was replaced by "Central Europe" and "Balkan region" or "Southeastern Europe". The idea of Central Europe, directly related to the former Habsburg Empire, is relatively old, but was resurrected in the 1970s (among others, by Czeslaw Milosz and

Milan Kundera) in an attempt to make people aware of the significant differences between Eastern Europe, on one hand, and USSR, on the other hand. The "Balkan" nations seem to share only the fate of having been, for some hundred years, vassals of the Ottoman Empire, and renown as a "barbarous" region especially during the Balkan war at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Although it is not always obvious which nations are belonging to which region, and most of the Balkan countries refuse to be considered Balkan, there is an almost generally accepted idea that Albania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania and Greece belong to the Balkan region. Some studies have also included Hungary in this region (Todorova, 1997), although in the case of Hungary there are good reasons to consider it as part of Central Europe.

The inclusion of Greece in the same group with some former communist countries makes the discussion about the Balkans particularly interesting: Greece was never part of the communist block, so, its "likeness" to the other countries from the region could only be a result of having been part of the Ottoman Empire. On the other hand, it would be problematic to affirm that fifty years of completely different historical courses did not affect the alleged resemblance between Greece and the former communist countries from Balkan Peninsula.

How can one argue for the existence of a Balkan identity? Kiossev (2002) claims that there are at least two ways to prove that there is still a strong identity of the Balkan region: racial traits and cuisine. A Balkan person traveling abroad, Kiossev said, knows that he/she can relatively easily recognize another Balkan person in the street precisely because of the facial traits and body movements, commonly shared by most Balkan people. Cuisine is another shared characteristic in the Balkans: dinning in a Greek restaurant means dinning "at home", only there you will get the food that are used to, if sometimes under a different name (Kiossev:

167). According to Kiossev, the Balkan cuisine descends from an Ottomanized Persian cuisine. “Its ‘natural’ borders (which coincide neither with the former empires nor with the contemporary nation states) can be drawn somewhere around Zagreb, where it abuts the mid-European front of chocolate cakes, sugary salads, and milky potages, while to the South, at Rijeka, it shades into the Dalmatian/Mediterranean cuisine of frutti di mare, pizzas, and spaghetti” (Kiossev: 172). One of the cooking specialties pointing to a relationship between Balkan and Persian cuisine is, to give only one example, the use of yogurt in meat-based meals in both cuisines, meat marinated in yogurt being one of the famous meals in the ancient Persian cuisine (Goody: 127) and minced meat wrapped in cabbage (*sarmale* or *sarmi*) with yogurt is one of the favorite Christmas meals in Balkan area.

A “national cuisine” is, strictly speaking, a self-contradiction: people’s ways of cooking transgress borders and are not limited by the language or extended to an entire country. There are only “regional cuisines” (Mintz: 114), and a region might be part of a certain country or, on the contrary, might include territories belonging to more than one country. This seems to be the case with the Balkan cuisine.

The persistence of similar cooking tastes all over Balkan Peninsula, despite the existence of very different political regimes and levels of development, with low contacts among people from different countries of the region, could be a result of the particular conservative characteristics of eating habits and of a low pressure toward change.

A “cuisine” is determined by the type of ingredients used, the order of the meals and the etiquette of eating (Goody: 151), so it is a social institution that does not change easily. The components of a cuisine are learnt of very early in life, through direct experience, and this is why our eating habits are conservative parts of our personality. Some new things might be added, some of the existing things might be changed by interaction with people having other habits (etiquette of eating, for example), but our tastes will always define a “good” or “bad” meal in terms of what we learnt early in our lives.

On the other hand, the society’s pressure toward changing food habits is low in regions where the population is homogeneous and the majority of people eat at home. This was the case with the

Communist countries from Balkan area until ’90. Nowadays such a thing might seem somehow strange, but before the 1990s even such renowned tourist destinations as Prague and Budapest exhibited a very small number of restaurants. “Dinning out” was an almost unknown experience to most of the Eastern Europeans. Although some of the communist leaders thought that dining out would have had beneficial effects as the national expenses on food would have gone down<sup>1</sup>, people continued to eat home-cooked food. And at home women (because domestic cooking in Europe was historically woman’s job, she is in charge with preparing the food) cooked what they learnt from their mothers and, in their turn, their mothers cooked what they learned from their mothers and so on.

### Data and methods

It appears that the idea of a common Balkan cuisine makes sense from several points of view. However, it is hard to really test such a hypothesis: namely, that people from a certain region share in a similar cuisine. In Eastern Europe there have been few surveys focusing only on the diet, although the surveys attempting to estimate the income usually have a section containing questions dedicated to the food consumption. “Cuisine” is a complex concept that includes not only ingredients used in cooking, along with ways of cooking, but also “etiquettes of eating”. For simplicity reasons, I will in the following consider the ingredients as the most important determinants of a cuisine without taking into account the other components. There are two hypotheses I am trying to test: 1) there is a commonly shared diet structure in Balkan area, and 2) people consume similar quantities of basic food. Although these hypotheses are considerably weaker than that of the existence of a “Balkan cuisine”, it seems to me that they are the means of doing the most of the available data.

The data are provided by the FAO (Food and Agriculture organization for United States) for 1980-2000. I will focus here on meat, vegetables and sugar consumption, as well on the number of calories consumed daily. In the group of Balkan countries I included: *Bulgaria, Greece, Albania, Romania, and Yugoslavia*. I have compared this group of countries with Hungary and with the Europe’s average. I have chosen Hungary in an attempt to highlight that the similarities in food consumption in Balkan peninsula are not only

the result of a geographic proximity: Hungary is also close to two of the Balkan countries (Romania and Yugoslavia) and still it has a very different cuisine.

For all the analyses I have used two distinct spans of time: 1980-1989 and 1990-2000. These periods of time are socially and politically very different for most of the countries from the region. On the other hand, if the political changes in the 1990s affected strongly the diet of the people living in the region (because either of the poverty, or of the increasing opportunities of being in contact with people with other tastes) the comparison (1990-2000 as against 1980-1989) would express these changes. However, one problem remains unsolved: the composition of Yugoslavia is different during the two periods of time.<sup>2</sup> I used data for all countries from Europe, without USSR and former USSR republics. I also excluded Czechoslovakia (and, for 1990-2000, Slovakia and Czech Republic) because the country disappeared after 1992 and I could not take into account these political changes by using the 1989 as the split point.

As far as the methods are concerned, I used hierarchical cluster analysis, which permits to cluster the cases by using one or more variables as grouping variables. Basically, this method measures how large is the distance between each two cases (I used the Euclidean distance as a measure for distance). Then, it groups together within a cluster those cases for which the distance is the smallest, measuring then the distance between these first level clusters (groups). Finally, it groups together the clusters that are the closest. These are the second level groups. The method continues until all groups are linked.

### Results and interpretations

I have taken into account five basic components of the diet: average annual consumption of meat, pork meat, vegetables, animal fat and sweeteners. The proportion of animal fat and sweeteners in daily diet are good indicators of the diet profile, so populations with a similar diet have to exhibit similar proportions of these two components. I have compared all the countries in Europe using these two variables in order to see whether the Balkan countries are somehow different. The results are presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2.<sup>3</sup>

Looking at the Figure 1 (1980-1989) and Figure 2 (1990-2000), the Balkan countries

(Greece, Romania, Albania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia) are grouped of the left side of the “Europe” point (average consumption in Europe), which shows that there are strong similarities between the diets in these countries in comparison with other parts of Europe. Hungary is located very far away (especially because of the high consumption of animal fat), but the Mediterranean countries (Spain, Portugal and Italy) are in the same part of the graph with the Balkan countries. This is an indication that, at least from the point of view of the animal fat and sweeteners used in cooking, the Balkan cuisine is not far away from the Mediterranean one.

There are no significant changes between 1980-1989 and 1990-2000 in terms of average diet composition of Balkan countries relative to other European countries, although the political and social situation changed dramatically between these two decades. The Balkan countries still group together in the left low side of the average European consumption of animal fat and sweeteners during 1980-1989 as well as after 1990. Only Yugoslavia decreased strongly the consumption of sweeteners, but this might be a result of the changing territory after 1990. At least from a visual inspection of the graphs, it seems that there is a certain consistency in the consumption of animal fat and sweeteners consumption among the Balkan countries, although there are no signs that the Balkan diet is radically different than the Mediterranean one.

The hierarchical cluster analysis<sup>4</sup> shows similar results (Appendix 1), although the first level clusters are not connecting Balkan countries together, but Balkan and Mediterranean countries. For example, based upon this analysis, it seems that Romania, Greece and Spain are close to each other in terms of animal fat and sweeteners consumption (this is a level 1 cluster and only a third level cluster group together all Balkan and Mediterranean countries). This result reinforces the idea that Balkan and Mediterranean diet cannot be distinguished from each other by only taking into account the consumption of animal fat and sweets.

The consumption of meat is important in European diet, although the non-animal food historically dominated the European cooking:

Until the middle decades of the nineteenth century, grains continued to dominate the European diet (except in the case of a small

privileged elite). Economically, they might absorb as much as 90 per cent of a family's food budget; calorically their role was decisive as well, normally accounting for between two-thirds and three-quarters of the total, and in any case no less than half. (Montanari: 152).

Nowadays, the non-animal consumption is still the most important source of the daily calories in any world population. The consumption of vegetarian food might be measured either as proportion of average daily calories intake (calories from vegetables versus calories from animal products) or as a total average consumption per year.

Figure 3 uses the first way of measuring (% calories from non animal food) for Balkan countries in comparison with the average European and Hungary consumption<sup>5</sup>. Yugoslavia has a pattern of consumption more similar with Hungary than with the other Balkan countries, with more than 40% of the calories provided by animal products. On the other hand, Greece has a much higher average daily calorie intake than the other countries, which might be an indication of the relatively richness of the country in comparison with the other Balkan countries.

An analysis carried out with hierarchical cluster method (with grouping variables being the number of calories from animal products 1980-1989 and 1990-2000) shows that Bulgaria, Romania and Greece belongs to the same first level cluster, but they are relatively distant from Albania and Yugoslavia (Appendix 2).

In the interpretation of these results it should take into account that the data are aggregated at a national level and, sometimes, the average might have a very different meaning from one country to another because of the inequalities within the countries compared. For example, in a country with strong inequalities, where most of the people are extremely poor, and some of them are very rich, with no "middle class", the term "average person" does not have a precise meaning. In these cases (and most of the former Eastern countries are in this category), it is preferable to compare the extremes – the richest 10% from one country with the richest 10% from another country and, similarly, the poorest 10%. Unfortunately, there are no data available for such a comparison.

As far as the meat as an animal product is concerned, this has not been, historically speaking, an important part of the Mediterranean cuisine (Montanari: 74). On the other hand, such countries as Romania with a still large proportion of religious population, it is expected to have low levels of meat consumption because of the long periods of fast. So, I expected the Balkan as well as Mediterranean countries to have similar levels of meat consumption. However, an analysis carried on by using the yearly consumption of meat and pork meat does not show the existence of any relationships between the Balkan countries: they did not belong to the same group, no matter whether the grouping variable is meat consumption during 1980-1989 and 1990-2000 or pork meat during the same periods of time. Pork meat is a popular option among the Balkan people especially during holidays (Christmas, New Year), but it does not seem to be consumed in similar quantities all over Balkan Peninsula.

### Conclusions

So, is there any such thing as a distinctively Balkan cuisine? If we look at what people in the Balkan region eat on a daily basis, things are difficult to interpret. There is, indeed, a similar pattern as far as the ingredients used among the people living in Balkan area are concerned, which pattern is not only a result of the geographical proximity (because, as we have seen, Hungarians, for example, do not share the same diet characteristics with Serbs and Romanians). However, the Mediterranean countries diet has a similar structure with the Balkan ones and it is hard to distinguish between the two cuisines. On the other hand, calories intake as well as meat consumption varies among the Balkan countries, which weakens the idea of a common and specific cuisine in the peninsula.

If we talk about "haute cuisine", the cuisine to be enjoyed in restaurants, there is some truth in claiming the existence of a Balkan cuisine. *Sarmale*, *baklava*, *musaka*, white cheese (Feta), *halva*, maybe under different names, but with similar tastes are some of the Balkan meals being usually served in a Greek, Romanian or Bulgarian restaurant, in New York or in any other big city, and they are recognized<sup>6</sup> as parts of the "Balkan cuisine". They are rather refined and sophisticated dishes, not eaten in the Balkans on an ordinary day, and it is hard to argue that such special meals, similar indeed all over the

Peninsula, can create and are part of a common cultural identity.

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would look too "busy" if I would picture the yearly trends.

<sup>4</sup> For this analysis, I used as grouping variables: average animal fat consumption 1980-1989, animal fat consumption 1990-2000, average sweeteners consumption 1980-1989 and average sweeteners consumption 1990-2000. The variables were rescaled on a 0-1 scale.

<sup>5</sup> The figures in top of the columns represent the average daily calorie intake.

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<sup>1</sup> At a given moment the Romanian Communist leader, Ceaucescu, got the idea of building immense supermarkets – cantinas – where people were supposed to purchase prepared food; these places were popularly called "famine's circuses" because the food to be served there would be of a poor quality. Fortunately enough, he did not have time to finish his project.

<sup>2</sup> Usually, only Serbia is considered part of the Balkan area. However, some studies included in *Balkan Peninsula* Croatia as well as Bosnia Herzegovina. Unfortunately, there are no data available for Serbia only, so I used the data for whole Yugoslavia, even if this would introduce some bias in results

<sup>3</sup> The figures present the average yearly consumption of animal fat and sweeteners for 1980-1989 and 1990-2000. The yearly trend brings similar conclusion, but the figure