

Regional Identity in the Post-Cold War Balkans

by **Dimitar BECHEV**

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The Author

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I Introduction

One of the most commonplace remarks, which people coming from different Balkan countries make when they get together, is that the inhabitants of this geographical region prove, in the final analysis, to share many common features, regardless of the nation, ethnicity or country they belong to. “This is our tragedy”, the insight goes further, “we are separated, but we turn out to be very similar. We share the same culture, body language, cuisine, music; we do understand each other”. When a person visits those countries, and is given the chance to compare their societies he or she is likely to encounter a wide range of features, mostly relating to popular culture, that seem to be strikingly resembling. To put it in more blatant terms, the ubiquitous *musaka* in restaurant menus or the undisputed popularity, enjoyed by the tunes of Goran Bregovic, a musician coming, quite ironically, from war-torn Sarajevo, come to one’s mind as good illustrations of that supports the above realisation. On a more sophisticated level, the existence of common linguistic features embodied in the Balkan linguistic union, comprising languages as different as Albanian, Greek, Romanian, Bulgarian (and some Serb dialects), provides grounds for speculations that culture offers some unexploited resources for inquiries into the realm of politics.

The issue at stake is not just a scholarly one. Analysing what Balkan identity means entails solving an interesting contradiction. Assertions that the peoples and states of the region share a number of common traits are often used to advance two rather different ideas. The first portrays the Balkans as a realm of socio-political strife, an opposition to integrating, prosperous and democratic Europe. It justifies a particular strategy of “ghettoisation” and marginalisation of the region (Todorova, 1997). The second interpretation dwells on the proposition that commonalities may promote cooperation and dialogue across national borders, and this is precisely what the average Balkanite, referred to above, means by invoking sameness. “Identifying” Balkan identity, therefore, is an intrinsically political act that provides a

rationale for different types of approaches towards the region to be adopted by the West and, importantly, by the Balkan states themselves.

Facing commonalities and yet fully aware of differences, this paper addresses the question whether there is a broader regional identity in the Balkans, which transcends national boundaries. It is critical to define what that specific identity means, what its political implications are, what the relationship between things national and regional is. Assuming identities and collective solidarities tend to be “discursively constructed, particularly enacted, and historically situated” (Wendt, 1994) or “plural, malleable, flexible” (Ferguson and Mansbach, 1994), I argue that as far as the Balkans are concerned there are both unexplored possibilities and a number of impediments in the quest for broader and multiple conceptions of belonging. The paper proposes a middle way of dealing with the issue of the relationship between national and regional which focuses on the proposition that a regional system of international relations is gradually emerging, which configures state-to-state interactions in particular ways and provides grounds for new identifications.

The first section of the paper underlies the merely practical implications of the project of self-determination and particularisation that has governed Balkan politics for at least 200 years and has triumphed with the last wave of national secessionism in the 1990s. The imperative to come up with modes of interstate co-operation inevitably leads to the question what the primary source of disunity is. Making some preliminary theoretical points (second section) and tracing the emergence of national identities and the demise of broader loyalties (third section), the paper proceeds to elaborate on two strategies attempting to reconcile parochialism and regionalism: the revaluation of the exclusivist narratives of ethnocentrism, and the construction of a specific regional political context that the Balkan states participate in. I consider the latter minimalist understanding superior and suggest that it contains the right explanation of Balkan regional identity.

II The Return of the Nation-State

The end of the Cold War has seen the reemergence of nationalism as a major driving force in international politics, and particularly in the western parts of the Balkan peninsula. The demise of the universalist ideology of communism together with the multinational Yugoslav state’s imminent collapse signaled the reaffirmation of the nation-state as the principal claimant of a person’s loyalty. Large scale nation-building processes in the post-Yugoslav part of the region, associated with phenomena ranging from linguistic engineering (the Dayton accords were signed in three languages

Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian) to ethnic cleansing (the case of Bosnia, Croatia's region of Krajina, and Kosovo), dominated the agenda in a similar way they did in the 19th and early 20th centuries when nation-building was at its highest. In itself, the emergence of new nation-states and therefore new borders, both in the maps and, importantly, in stadiums, newspapers, textbooks etc, is indicative of the triumph of the emancipatory project bearing the label self-determination, a project that has developed for two centuries or more in the Balkans. In terms of outcomes, what was happening in former Yugoslav republics has been strikingly similar to the experience of polities with longer record of homogenisation policies and it is by no means accidental that Serbian scholars "recalled" the example of massive exchange of populations occurring in the 1910-1920s in the southern Balkans in their effort to come up with ways of tackling ethnic diversity that impeded successful delimitation (Djordjević and Samardžić, 1989)

Disregarding the obvious difficulties in drawing borders, it is beyond any doubt that one of the results of the great turmoil is the reaffirmation of the nation-state as a chief agent in the regional politics. The real issue at stake is what comes next rather than what alternatives to the reality of political fragmentation may be implemented (e.g. the Yugoslav experiment or the once popular ideas of a Balkan federation). At this historical point that possibly closes a page, opened with the rise of nationalism in early 19th century, it is imperative to pose the question how nation-states interact presented with the shortcomings of divisions. The latter are evident in the inability of individual Balkan states to promote economic growth and societal modernisation, provide political stability and viable responses to the challenges of a globalising world through their own efforts alone. Even without speculating about other plausible transnational dependencies and given the geographical proximity alone, it becomes self-evident why working jointly is necessary.

Indeed the urgency of political and economic co-operation is well understood and articulated. Moreover, it has by now become a central issue in the politics of the region. Since the so-called Balkan Helsinki process was launched at the 1988 Belgrade summit, there have been a remarkable number of initiatives that focus on adopting cooperative strategies for tackling shared problems, culminating most notably with the much advertised Stability Pact initiated in Sarajevo, in 1999. There is something important that should be pointed out, however. The theoretical focus on interstate competition/cooperation in the study of international relations surely helps making sense of Balkan regional affairs, but it is suggested that a more comprehensive account of the relationship between togetherness/separateness should attempt to go further and elaborate on the paradigmatic question of how one associates or differentiates, the question of identity. In order to address that question, it is crucial to situate it in the

right theoretical framework. The next section is directed towards that particular aim.

III Theoretical Aspects

The present essay proceeds for the assumption that there are identities other than the national that are of significant political consequence. Those may lack the potential to challenge existing loyalties, but are nevertheless conducive to elaborating more complex analyses of international politics.

There is an important point to be made when assessing identities. A person may find herself/himself belonging to various groups (supporters of Manchester United, members of a global professional association etc), but national allegiance is qualitatively different from others due to the fact it requires precedence (Poole, 1999:82). In a case whereby a contest of loyalties occurs, it is the national, or the ethnic in case of ethnic-based movements pointed towards national-self determination, which affords itself legitimacy and priority. The above axiom underpins the political significance of national identity and illustrates the importance of exploring how identities claiming political precedence originate, develop, transform, and most importantly how they interact with other identities that may be of inferior ranking, and yet influence the “superior” one.

Apparently, the themes related to identity and culture are becoming increasingly important in International Relations theory. There is a sufficient practical reason for that, and it takes one just turn the TV set on to realise how abundant are the examples of identity-oriented political phenomena. Secessionist movements, economic and political integration, ethnic nationalism are but few instances that motivate the interest of the academics. On the other hand, introducing culture and identity into mainstream theory proves to be problematic at the very outset. The focus on states, conceived as unitary actors and behaving in accordance of the prescripts of rationality, *a priori* leaves questions about identity out of the picture. Indeed, *international* relations theory has lost, along the way, the “national” component and is preoccupied with the state as the institutional “nutshell” within which nations and national identities are contained (Kratochwil and Lapid, 1996; Tooze, 1996). This particular strategy of simplification is even better exemplified in the case of Waltzian neorealism with its emphasis on the structure of the international system and “theoretical parsimony”. The assumption that the internal characteristics of the units may influence the interaction is alien to neorealism, which focuses on the systemic and claims that different actors are inclined to adopt likely policies due to the constraints of the overall system (Waltz, 1979).

Neoliberalism, the other competing perspective on International Relations, is unable to provide us with sufficient guidance either. In the words of Roger Tooze,

[Like neoralism] *Neoliberalism similarly allows little room for ... fundamental questioning of the unit of analysis, although the state is viewed more as a collective, nonetheless, remains as the necessary core unit of analysis.* (Tooze, 1996: xix).

The conclusion is that in taking the state as an ontologically given and ahistorical entity, mainstream theory attributes little, if any, attention to coming to terms with the nation-state equation. It is quite curious how the whole scholarship on international politics has turned out to be segregated from nationalism studies that have evolved as a discipline with the works of authors such as Gellner, Hobsbawm, Anderson and Smith. It is plausible that new research programs in international relations theory will have to draw on both traditions and that can provide new intellectual resources for conceptualising the dynamics of identity interactions. A rather similar kind of fusion is suggested by Inyatullah and Blaney, who point at Todorov's emphasis on the centrality of construction of Self and Other and the broad scope of possible interactions with otherness as a corner stone of a cultural theory of international relations (Inyatullah and Blaney: 1994: 81). In trying to define regional identity in the Balkans and its place in shaping the political landscape, it is essential to inquire into the dynamics of differentiation and superimposition of national identities over the canvass of older identificational layers. In the following section, this paper assesses the relationship between national and prenational as one of the viable frameworks in which the question of identity may be answered.

In addition to tracing the historical process of growth of national identities and self-determination, the paper suggests there may be an alternative approach as well. Certainly, there are voices coming from a more mainstream part of the spectrum that call for a state-centric approach in dealing with identities. Introducing the question of identity in the IR theory's research programme, Wendt states that the chief shortcoming of traditional perspectives in that respect is not the focus on states and the lack of sensitivity of what is "inside the nutshell", but the assumptions that the states as basic units are motivated solely by the prescripts of rationality and that the systemic structures are materially preconditioned and exogenous to interactions and practices. The insistence of the possibility of collective identity formation amongst actors underlies the conclusion that unit interaction may lead to systemic change and that identity should be attributed a place far more important than the one that orthodox theorists were likely to assign it. (Wendt, 1996). For Wendt, ideational phenomena have higher ontological standing than material structures in shaping the

realm of international relations, and this is precisely why identities matter. This proposition traces an alternative road for the theoretical treatment of the regional/ national identity issue in the Balkans as a problem concerning primarily the interstate politics of the day. That approach turns out to be equally fruitful, if not superior, in analysing the parameters of the problem, and it requires, among other things, singling out the some determinants and criteria that facilitate the process of identity formation.

IV The Historical Dynamics

The Balkan nations developed over the remnants of larger prenational groupings. It was the Orthodox ecumene or the Muslim universal community of believers, the *umma*, existing within the political framework of the Ottoman empire and the well established practices of cultural and religious syncretism at grass-root level that national particularism questioned. Breaking-up with universalism, national ideologies inevitably demanded the conceptualisation and, subsequently, exclusion of otherness as a focal point in their agendas. There are numerous examples to be quoted. 19th century Bulgarian nationalism was at first not as much pointed against the Ottoman state, but embraced the ideal of establishing its national church and secession from the authority of the Ecumenical Patriarch, which meant nothing less than undermining the idea of Orthodox universalism, and accentuating the new national allegiance. Regardless of the ethnic basis of the new borders that had to be drawn, which in itself presumes that differentiation is not a distinctly modern phenomenon and has its ethnic roots (Smith, 1986), the enactment of new national goals and values was intertwined with severing important links.

The fact that nation-building entailed such a radical departure from larger conceptions of community makes it problematic to speculate about certain shared notions of Balkan regional identity at present. The insistence on a specific Balkan *mentalité* (a concept embraced most notably by the Serbian geographer Jovan Cvijić) proves to be equally susceptible to criticism as the concept of “naturalness” of national divisions. It has been quite aptly attacked by Kitromilides who suggests that the projection of patterns of commonality, world views and values are possible only within specific historical context which he finds to be the prenational Orthodox Balkan society (Kitromilides, 1996). The corollary to that argument is that Balkan *mentalité* was gone with the advent of nationalism in the late 18th and early 19th century.

The critics of overgeneralisations, coming usually from different universities' history departments, are not entirely dismissive of certain cultural concepts

of the Balkans. Maria Todorova echoes a number of Kitromilides' arguments in her attempt to rebuke the essentialist conception of the Balkans, contained in what she typifies the Western discourse of balkanism (Todorova, 1997). In emphasising that the world of pan-Balkan socio-political realities (and, in fact, affections and loyalties), located in the shared experiences of the Ottoman time, headed to its demise with the rise of nationalism and emergence of nation-states, she admits that certain societal structures are still present that are embedded mostly in popular culture. The author admits that

[the Balkans constitute a] *region, possibly a subregion of the larger Mediterranean area.*

The strictly political implications of the notion of regionality and commonalities are not elaborated, arguably because they are outside the scope of the question Todorova is interested in. But neither is the question of how a shared popular culture impacts political behaviour given its due attention. There are three things that we can know for sure from Todorova. First, the Balkans as an entity originate, or at least was solidified, in the Ottoman era. It is the Ottoman heritage that needs to be in the spotlight when speculating about what is shared. Second, political and socio-economic experience of unity is nothing more than history nowadays; Balkan societies have steadily followed the path of modernisation and did their best to enact some radical policies of transformation in the social, political, and economic spheres. Third, what has remained are certain features related, almost entirely, to popular culture. This is what one is left with after inquiring into the history of differentiation and nation-building that was intertwined with leaving back both Ottoman legacies and cross-national cultural exchange, evidenced in such characteristic phenomena as multilingualism (Todorova, 1996:181). It is English, and not any of the Balkan languages, which is used as *lingua franca* several generations after cleavages started occurring.

Nevertheless, the Balkanites oftentimes identify themselves, willy-nilly, with their common cultural legacy, which transcends both national and, most likely, religious dividing lines. It is a phenomenon whose place in the hierarchy of identities has not yet been clarified, admittedly due to the substantive pejorative connotations that Todorova aims at unveiling. To summarise, history proves to have as its by-product identities that overlap or are superimposed one over another. The project of drawing boundaries might be successful to a great extent, but there are certain areas that are not affected (or were not of considerable interest to this project).

V The Role of Culture in Shaping Political Identities

What is the consequence of the fact that a Greek and an Albanian may share the same gastronomic preferences, or a Serb and Bulgarian realise they actually can understand each other talking in their respective language? Even more so, what if Romanians, Serbs, Bulgarians, Greeks all belong to the same religion, the Orthodox Christianity. One is tempted to ask whether cultural similarities and affinities, or prenational identities, provide reliable grounds for speculating about broader and politically significant loyalties. The grandiose concept of civilisations, political agents established along religious and cultural lines, as conceived by Huntington, comes to one's mind as the ultimate manifestation of the proposition that there are (id)entities larger, both metaphorically and geographically, than the nation-states (Huntington, 1993, 1996). Are there any chances that history leads us back to where we departed from, namely to some grander entities resembling, as far as the Balkan context is concerned, the Ottoman *millet*s?

Here, it is critical to introduce an argument contained in Fouad Ajami's reply to Huntington. Referring to the Yugoslav wars after 1991, Ajami makes the observation that the appeals towards some "civilisational" solidarity proved to be but a tool in the hands of the emerging nation-states in their quest for power, security, and recognition. Pushing transnational identities to the fore in the particular example of the Yugoslav conflict has been instrumental and didn't really account for some major transformation in loyalties. (Ajami, 1993). The commonalities may fall short to play such a significant role they are assigned to. Cultural identities are instruments for implementing the nation-states' egoistic interest.

Paradoxically enough, it is this notion of *instrumentality* that helps in defining one of the possible roles regional affinities may be assigned. It supports an argument, which substantially diverges from Ajami's conservative realist criticism towards Huntington's propositions. The growing awareness of cultural similarities, which results from the greater scale of information flow, economic and political interaction, and larger number of purely personal contacts, supplies considerable resources for questioning the ethnocentric narratives that dominated the intellectual development of the Balkan peoples for a long time. Without being able to challenge national differences to the extent that it becomes a phenomenon of primary political significance, facing commonalities turns out to be an instrument for developing new modes of assessing the ideas inherited by the project of building separateness. Rethinking the relationships between Self and Other is crucial for pursuing strategies of co-operation. Cultural affinities and commonalities have the potential of generating new types of discourse that are not based on the exclusivist reasoning of nationalism. They come as a stimulus to reevaluate critically the ossified ontology of

national identities and allow more space for multiplicity and ambiguity. The premodern structures and identities in the Balkans, preserved within the realms of popular culture and language, inform a genuinely postmodern interpretations that are, in fact, quite appealing for the intellectuals of the region tempted by the new horizons opened by viewing their own experience through the prism of the fashionable theories of the day. The question remains, however, whether this potential of transcending the discourses of modern nationalism together with the exclusivistically framed identities has any palpable political impact outside the academia or even a modest number of *illuminati*.

There is another point to be raised. Speculating about broader identities on the premises of shared cultural legacies seems elusive, if we assume it is the Ottoman past that is the realm where commonalities stem from. This automatically excludes countries such as Croatia or Slovenia (in some sense even Romania) from the picture. Although they belong, at least from a geographical point of view, to the Balkan peninsula and are closely linked to it (or to parts of it) through their political experience of the last one-hundred years or so, still they lie outside the boundaries of the shared popular culture admittedly inherited by the rest. There must be a broader and more inclusive framework in which the question of regionality should be discussed. Dutu suggests that what we should pay attention to are not the legacies, but rather the shared issues that all Balkan or, as he puts it, Southeast European countries have to face in this particular moment (Dutu: 1995). Such issues are thought to be the process of societal modernisation, political democratisation and economic reform, integration within the structures of the West. Culture and the inquiry into the interaction between the prenational and the national is just one of the feasible approaches, but there are too many questions left unanswered.

VI Regional Identity as a Political Concept

After clarifying both the virtues and insufficiencies of what is named for the purposes of this paper historical/cultural approach towards Balkan regional identity, it is suggested that there are other theoretical tools, which come at hand. In fact, the theory of Alexander Wendt on how state systems and identities correlate has much to offer to the Balkans. There are three core claims in this constructivist understanding of international politics: (1) states are the principal actors in the system; (2) the key structures of the system are intersubjective rather than material; and (3) state identities and interests are in large part constructed by those structures, rather than being determined exogenously by the system by human nature or domestic politics (Wendt, 1996:48).

First, one may ask whether we have a well-discernable Balkan or Southeast European regional system of IR, and the answer is clearly in the positive. Geographical factors, history, shared agendas, as well as the day-to-day political practices that have already resulted in some institution- building (the Stability Pact, the Multinational Forces in Southeast Europe etc). illustrate not only the objective, but also the subjective dimension of this strictly political concept of a single region. There is a well articulated consensus among the political actors as to the Balkans as an arena of where they project certain goals and interests.

What requires further exploration is the intersubjective structures that inform the regional system of international relations and the social roles each actor has within this particular setting. The whole argument that the leading aspect in the politics of the region has been for at least 200 years, and most notably since the end of the Cold War, the quest for political emancipation and self-determination affirms the proposition that the ideational dimension is the main point of reference in this political context. The material structures of state fragmentation are secondary to the project of nationalism and ethnocentrism whose consequences have been sufficiently discussed. They are, in fact, its result. The mutual constitution of Self and Other (and the ensuing interdependence of identities) evidenced in the rise of 19th century Balkan national movements and staging its late culmination during the break-up of Yugoslavia, is the founding act giving birth to the system, but arguably important elements within the structure which shapes action are the cultural commonalities, perceptions and sustainable images of neighbours, shared history, the subjective understanding of common socio-political and economic agendas and prospects for the future. To conclude, the ideational backbone of this Balkan/ Southeast European regional system of international relations, which is produced through the participation of all actors, is what can be possibly called Balkan/ Southeast European identity, in very broad terms.^[1] Participation equals identification. The very context proves to be a specific type of identity itself. It has been actualised constantly through the regional actors' interaction and is, therefore, not reducible to solely to the relics of the prenatal, as the focus on cultural "archaeology" may rather falsely imply.

On the other hand, the above is certainly not what Wendt understands as collective identity. To do him justice, we should not fail to mention that he introduces the concept of collective identity formation amongst states as one of the central tenets of his theory, but this concept has a different meaning (Wendt 1996: 54-58). The model evidenced in EU, or collective security systems, exemplify best what the real contents of the concepts are. Still, one can think in such terms about the Balkans too. Assuming that the realm of ideas, perceptions and subjectivity, in general, is constitutive for international politics, the possibility of structural change proves to be

embedded in the perspective. This brings back the question whether larger identities are viable. Is there Balkan identity *stricto sensu* ?

Wendt enumerates three specific groups of factors that influence collective state identity formation:

a. Structural context. The intersubjective structures of the system may or may not favour positive identification across national borders. Speaking in the terms of the region, Greece and rump Yugoslavia are more likely to embrace the idea of collectivity, given the practices they have established for a long period of time, then Albania and either of those two.

b. Systemic processes. Factors exogenous to the system may inform fostering collective identities too. Such are interdependence (economic, political, environmental and so forth), the presence of a common external thread, social convergence (the triumph of democracy and market economy etc.)

c. Strategic practices. Identities and interests can be transformed or modified in and by the very process of interaction (Wendt 1996: 54-56).

Applying Wendt's model, we can conclude that we should not rule out the chances that collectivity evolves in the context of Balkan international relations especially in view of the overall trend towards economic integration and political reforms aimed at democratisation (the systemic processes determinants). Wendt is quick to point out, however, that there is nothing inevitable about collective identity, nor should there be any imputed teleology or directionality. Bearing in mind this caveat and the unfavourable structural conditions (the logic of differentiation), regional identity in the Balkans, in the narrow sense, remains just a possibility and a political project of a rather vague nature in the time being.

VII Conclusion

There are two rather different conceptions of Balkan regional identity. One relates to the premodern structures entrenched within certain clusters of cultural experience, and the other is better understood as the characteristics of a specific political context within which the regional actors operate. While not underestimating the significance and, indeed, the transformational potential of the former, it is the latter phenomenon, which appears to be more consequential. The contours of a regional system of international relations in Southeast Europe have been steadily becoming clearer and the level of interaction among the states in this geographic perimeter is higher

due to the great amount of challenges and issues that require joint action. This process and the shared identifications it entails is a major feature of the post-Cold War period. There is a sufficient reason for claiming there is something new about it. It is necessary to be pointed out that after the processes of nation-building fragmented political loyalties, domestic political experience and external political engagements have led all Balkan countries apart from each other in previous periods. If we consider the example of two quite different cases such as Greece and Albania during the Cold War era, we will be able to see how the former's incorporation in the Western sphere of influence following 1946-1949, and the latter's isolationism both contributed to their comparative disengagement from regional affairs and the decline of the identification with the politics of the peninsula. Not to mention the rationale behind Tito's Yugoslavia grander political objectives as the leader of the non-aligned nations movement or the impact of the rigid divide between the Warsaw pact and NATO traversing the peninsula. It is the "re-discovery" of the neighbours that occurred in the 1990s and the new dynamism in the politics of the European southeast, which bring about regional identity.

The Balkans as a region are as much a relic of the Ottoman period and/or a prenational experience of less articulated borders and divisions, as a reality actualised by the routine conduct of politics. Cultural commonalities are substantial element of the general structures within which political action takes place, but account little for what happens in the domain of interstate affairs. Insofar the (re)construction of a Balkan system of international relations provides clearer guidelines as to what the safest concept of regional identity is, the latter is hardly an antipode of the national and it is not capable of disenfranchising existing political divergences. Most likely, this constitutes a further step towards demystifying the all-pervading concept of Balkan commonalities.

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IX About the Author

Dimitar Hristov Bechev– (b. 1975), Doctoral student at St. Antony's College, University of Oxford. Research interests - politics in Southeastern European, International Relations theory, nationalism studies. Associate of the Institute for Security and International Studies (ISIS).

X About the Institute for Security and International Studies

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XI Publications of ISIS

Research Studies:

"Bulgaria and the Balkans in the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union" (Plamen Pantev, Valeri Rachev, Venelin Tsachevsky), 44 pp., July, 1995. Research Study 1. In Bulgarian and English.

"Problems of Civil-Military Relations in Bulgaria: Approaches to Improving the Civilian Monitoring of the Armed Forces" (Plamen Pantev, Valeri Rachev, Todor Tagarev), 96 pp., April, 1996. Research Studies – 2. In Bulgarian.

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ISIS Address

1618 Sofia, lc "Krasno selo", bl. 194 , ent. B, ap. 36
P. O. Box 231, Bulgaria
Phone/Fax: ++(359 - 2-) 551 828
E-Mail Address: isis@cserv.mgu.bg

Website: <http://www.isn.ch/isis>

[1] For the overall discussion of Southeast Europe, see *South-Eastern Europe: History, Concepts, Borders*, papers presented at a conference held by the School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies (SSEES), London.