Chapter Two
ETHNO-HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. The Balkan peninsula

The Balkan peninsula derives its name from the Turkish word for the Slavic toponym Stara Planina – the mountain range in Northern Bulgaria, to the south of the Danube.¹ The first person to use the term Balkan Peninsula was the German geographer Zeune (1808), who replaced the former reference to the peninsula as “European Turkey” with Balkanhalbinsel. Over a hundred years later, the Serbian geographer Cvijić supported this term, stating that there was une répugnance évidente ‘evident repulsion’ at the description of the Balkans as “Turkey in Europe” (cf. Cvijić 1918:2). The name Balkan Peninsula was readily accepted since it was parallel to the names of the other two peninsulas in Southern Europe, the Pyrenean and the Apennine one, which were also named after mountain ranges.

1.1 While the eastern, southern and western boundaries of the peninsula are defined by the borders of the Adriatic, Ionian, Mediterranean, Aegean and Black seas, its northern boundary is defined by two mighty rivers: the Sava, from its head-waters in the Alps, north of the Gulf of Trieste, to its junction with the Danube, and the Danube from here on, to its estuary in the Black Sea (cf. Cvijić 1918:2; Katičić 1976:11). Thus, unlike the northern boundaries of the Pyrenean and the Apennine peninsula, which are closed by high mountains – the Pyrenees and the Alps, respectively, the northern boundaries of the Balkan Peninsula are not sharply separated from the rest of continental Europe. Because of this, the Balkan peninsula has been very open to invasion from the north, and it is from the north that numerous invasions have come.² The invasions have driven into the peninsula a diversity of tribes and have turned it into a conglomeration of peoples and languages.

1.2 With the exception of Stara Planina and the Rhodope ranges, which are moderately high and have numerous mountain passes, the major mountain chains in the Balkans run north-south; so, the invaders have been able to penetrate deep into the peninsula. Having settled, the individual tribes were isolated, however, the high mountains hindering the creation of common states and encouraging linguistic localisms.

2. Ethnic Balkans

The modern Balkan states share a geographical unity and historical heritage dating back to inhabitation during the Lower Paleolithic times, 200,000-100,000 B.C. (cf. Carter 1977:1). In the course of the first millennium of the modern era, however, due to the uneven influence of Rome in the territories in and around the Balkans, which the empire had conquered, two different civilizations developed on the peninsula.

¹ Stara planina in all the Slavic languages means ‘old mountain’. The Turkish word balkan means ‘thickly wooded mountain range’ or ‘high ridge’.
² The Ottoman Turks, who appeared in the fourteenth century, were the first invaders who did not come from the north, their invasion being made possible by the fact that they first conquered Asia Minor.
2.1 During the period before Christ, Roman influence on the Balkans was chiefly along the Adriatic and Ionic coast, concentrating in coastal towns. In the first century A.D. the Romans began pushing their frontiers inland across the Balkans. As they advanced, they established forts and small towns and built roads to connect them with the coast. The countryside beyond the forts and the towns remained populated with indigenous population, however, and experienced little or no Roman influence.

2.2 In 324, the emperor Constantine chose to live in the east and established a new center there, Constantinople. This marked the beginning of the end of the centralized Roman rule, which was precipitated after the death of emperor Theodosius I, who divided the empire between his two sons, into Old Rome in the west and New Rome in the east. From the fifth century onwards, two distinct spheres of influence developed on the Balkans – Latin in the western part of the peninsula and Greek in its eastern part, eventually each with its own Christian church. The empire remained “Roman” and, despite the divisions of its territory, it was always seen as a single unit. The citizens of both the western and eastern part called themselves Romans, though Greek came to be the predominant language in the east. The term Helle ‘Greek’ connoted a pagan; Christian Greeks called themselves “Romans” (cf. Fine 1991:15-16).

2.3 After the Slavic invasions of the late sixth and seventh centuries cut off east-west communications, the differences between the two parts of the Roman empire increased rapidly. The dividing line between Old Rome and New Rome ran from Sremska Mitrovica – a Serbian city on the river Sava, close to the border with Croatia, to Scadar – a city on a lake at the Montenegrin/Albanian border, close to the Adriatic sea. This is basically the line dividing the Catholic from the Orthodox sphere of influence to date.

2.4 When the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires came into the picture, the ethnic borders of the Balkans, distinct from its geographical borders, were definitely shaped. The western borders were moved eastwards – what is now Slovenia and part of Croatia (west of the river Una) “went out” of the “ethnic” Balkans, whereas in the north and north-east the boundary was extended far beyond the Danube, to encompass the Serbian province of Vojvodina and most of present-day Romania. It is throughout this “ethnic Balkans” that the Balkan Sprachbund linguistic features spread.

3. Greek in retrospective

Already in the Late Bronze Age, Greek was the most important language of what is now mainland Greece and was expanding its influence in Crete and the Archipelago. And yet, Greek is not the oldest language of the Agean area. Herodotus writes that, originally, Greece was called Pelasia and was inhabited by Pelasgians (cf. Katičić 1976). But the historical tradition that the Pelasgians were the Pre-Hellenic, barbarian population of almost the whole of Greece seems to be a product of the epics. The historical Pelasgians lived in a restricted area – in the town of Larisa and the Thessalian plain surrounding it. According to Meyer (1892), they were a Greek tribe that succumbed to the onslaught of another Greek tribe, which came from the same austere mountains of Epirus, from which the Pelasgians had once begun the conquest of Thessaly. Katičić (1976:22),

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3 The term Byzantine is an invention of Renaissance scholars; it was not used by its contemporaries. (cf. Fine 1991:15-16).