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Authors:

Martina Plantak
PhD candidate in Political Science, Andrássy University Budapest, Hungary

martina.plantak@andrassyuni.hu

Edina Paleviq
PhD candidate in Political Science, Andrássy University Budapest, Hungary

edina.paleviq@andrassyuni.hu

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"Banal Balkanism?" – Rethinking Banal Nationalism and Regional Identity in the Post-Yugoslav Media Space

Martina Plantak

Edina Paleviq

Andrássy University Budapest, Hungary

Abstract

With the collapse of Yugoslavia, the supranational Yugoslav identity disappeared and was replaced by strengthened national identities. While some states of the former Yugoslavia have rediscovered their Europeanness, others have further strengthened their national identity. This paper answers the question of whether, three decades after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, a so-called "regional identity" still exists among the former Yugoslav states (Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Kosovo). The authors set the initial hypothesis that belonging to a regional – in this case, Balkan – identity is more pronounced in the five candidate (Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia) and potential candidate countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), and Kosovo) for European Union (EU) membership than in Slovenia and Croatia, which have become EU Member States. Hence, this article will provide insight into "regional identity" and the banality of "Balkanism" reproduced in state media. By examining articles on national online news portals, we will examine the linkage between symbols and deixes in media and their role in creating national and regional identity. This analysis will confirm our initial hypothesis that the term "regional identity" is much more prominent in the media of the EU candidate countries, than in those states which are already members of the EU. By analysing everyday nationalism in the media – a gap that exists in

academic research – we aim to open up a discussion that can lead to some solutions for overcoming the identity dilemmas of the region.

Keywords: banal nationalism; Balkans; ethnic nationalism; regional identity; media;

Introduction

As one of the newest approaches of modern theories of nationalism, banal nationalism is gaining in importance and accordingly, for certain countries and regions, the number of studies dealing with this topic is continuously increasing. In the post-Yugoslav region, there are very few studies that deal with the exploration of banal nationalism in everyday life and the examination of this phenomenon through the lens of national and regional media seems to have been left out. This paper holds that there is more to the region than geography. The word "Balkans" invokes such a variety of definitions that, despite all efforts from scholars on this topic, there is still no one single definition that delineates this geographical area. Still, in everyday life, all countries of the former Yugoslavia except for Slovenia and with the addition of Albania are most often taken as the definition of the Balkans. For this reason, in this research, the area of the Balkans is firstly identified with the geographical area of the former Yugoslav states.

Although there are already similar research studies on the subject which all focus primarily on the relationship between media and identity (such as "Banal nationalism in the Turkish press" (Yumul and Özkirimli, 2000), "Banal Europeanism" (Cram, 2001; 2009), and "Banal Europeanism and Americanism in English and Bulgarian media" (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2014)), so far a similar examination about banal nationalism in post-Yugoslav media and through the lens of regional identity seems to be missing. Since all the researched countries in this paper were once part of the same federation, have shared the same history, have similar languages, and have interconnected cultures, this paper aims to test whether regional identity is still featured in state media, and if so, to what extent. According to Baskar, strong ethnic nationalism is still quite relevant in the former Yugoslav countries and is embodied especially through "a strong hatred of regionalism, which is perceived as a threat to national unity" (2014, p. 11). For this investigation, we employ Michael Billig's theory of banal nationalism. Thus, we have an insight into how nationalism, as well as the potential regional identity, is implemented in state media coverage, as well as contributing to the growing body of research

in this area through the aforementioned approach.

In this paper, we understand the "Balkans" not only as a geographical concept but also as a cultural entity. The fact that a certain dose of regionalism or "banal Balkanism" already exists among former Yugoslav countries can be seen from a range of sources – from informative politics-focused television stations for the whole region such as Al Jazeera Balkans or N1 Television – all the way up to various television channels and entertainment programmes such as MTV Adria, X Factor Adria, regional Big Brother, etc. Clearly, there are a variety of names for this geographical place, such as the "Balkans", "Adria", the "region", etc. Accordingly, with so many different names and without clearly marked borders, the Balkans becomes an imaginary geographical and cultural area, or area of banality (see Billig, 1995; Todorova, 2015, etc.).

1. Banal nationalism and regional identity

Banal Nationalism, by Michael Billig (1995), can be considered the first study to provide a systematic analysis of the reproduction of nationalism (Özkirimli, 2000, p. 199). In his work, Billig shows that in every country there is a continuous *marking* or reminder of nationality, which means that established nations are simply those states that have confidence in their continuity. He states that it is precisely nationality that provides "a continuous basis for political discourses, cultural products, and even for the structuring of newspapers" (Billig, 1995, p. 8). Billig's thesis emphasises the influence of politics and the mass media, which every day, through the use of certain symbols and deixes, flag "the nationhood in the eyes of the citizenry in established Western democracies. Exactly these deixes, which are described as short words such as "*we", "our", "this", "here", "nation"*, are "continually pointing to the national homeland as the home of the readers" (ibid, p. 11). Furthermore, belonging to a territory defined by external boundaries that divides those who belong ("us") from those who do not belong (Skey, 2011) is an integral part of constructing a national identity. Following Hudson (2006, p. 627) "places are complex entities that unite material objects, people, and systems of social relations and are in a constant process of emergence." Since places are always closely related to identity, the relationship between space and national identity is diverse, creating complex geography made up of borders, symbolic areas, and localities (Edensor, 2002, p. 37). And where does regional identity stand here? Even though the meaning of regional identity may differ to some extent from the definition above, there still exists an invisible border placed in opposition to the border of the nation-state – a border that is marked and therefore "visible" (Baskar, 2014, p. 13), having a "symbolic shape" that can be manifested in different practices

such as, for example in culture or media, and can also be used in the construction of identity narratives which include the name of the region and various other symbols (Paasi, 2002, p. 140).

Regional identity, therefore, is what people, politicians, and states make out of it; it is how they interpret history and culture (Bechev, 2006, p. 9). Hence, one must demonstrate that the region's outer limits are more important than the multiple dividing lines inside it (ibid, p. 8). Even nostalgia for past times or historical connections can be the reason for creating regional identity (Chromý and Janů, 2003, p. 108). In European terms, following the processes of Europeanisation, regional identity has become an important category and one that is often taken as self-evident in the relations between a group of people and a bounded region (Paasi, 2002, p. 137). Since the Balkans is a Western construct, this region serves as an "other", and becomes the semi-periphery of Europe, being located at the external boundaries of the EU. Alternatively, following Stuart Hall's (2018) definition of "The West and the Rest", it highlights how Western nations are defined opposed to non-Western ones, and how European nations need to find their *sense of self* precisely through the differences which separate them from non-European nations. In brief, there can be no "us" without "them" (Billig, 1995, p. 78), where "they" in academic literature indicates the groups most often described as "others" (see Petersoo, 2007; Luketić, 2013).

2. "Balkan" as identity marker and the media

Among many authors (see Todorova, 2015; Bakić-Hayden, 1995), the term "*Balkans*" has acquired a specific and distinctly non-geographical meaning. Moreover, the term "Balkanac" (Balkanite) in South Slavic languages has a negative connotation, and therefore, a problem facing the people living in the territory of the former Yugoslavia and the Balkans itself is that their identity is built on a negative self-image. This means that their self-perception is in line with the beliefs established by the Western value system, and thus becomes the denominator of the "other". Apart from Bulgaria, which views the term *Balkans* in a very neutral and even positive context (see Todorova, 2015; Šarić, 2009), all of the other countries want to distance themselves from the term, especially Slovenia and Croatia. According to multiple researchers, the judgments of Slovenes and Croats towards the term "Balkans" became stronger especially after independence and their desire to join the EU (see Ceglar, 1999; Velikonja, 2002; Stankovič, 2002; Bechev, 2006; Vezovnik, 2009; Zupančič, 2015). Furthermore, as Todorova highlights, there has never been a common Balkan identity, but merely "the occasionally

romantic and occasionally reluctant recognition of cultural similarities accumulated over the centuries which, at times, assume the form of a defensive common response to an ascriptive identity from the outside" (Todorova, 2004, p. 12).

In the terms of the researched area, the banality of regional identity in former Yugoslav media and the question of nation and homeland were particularly prominent in both Slovenian and Croatian national narratives after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. At the same time, both countries had the same dichotomous relationship regarding national identity – i.e. strengthening one's own national identity through daily practices and routines using both "bottom-up" and "top-down" approaches, while constructing and reawakening their historical (Central) European identity by abandoning and denying all the characteristics of "Balkanness" (Vezovnik, 2009; see also Bechev, 2006; Velikonja, 2005). In her study, Šarić (2009) researches the connotations of the'term "Balkans" in post-Yugoslav media articles and shows how much both Slovenia and Croatia have distanced themselves from this term. While Todorova (2004; 2015) claims there is no common "Balkan identity", Bechev (2006) for example argues that it is precisely the shared identity that has played a crucial role in regionalisation projects in South-Eastern Europe (Bechev, 2006). "They either accept the stigma of being Balkan or project it onto their neighbours in order to assert their own 'Europeanness'" (ibid, p. 10). Therefore, we wanted to see how this potential "regional identity" is produced in the media. As Šarić shows, "the use of the term the Balkans in the self-images of the former Yugoslavia was extremely rare, if not non-existent. Thus, the spread of the name the Balkans in the media in the south Slavic territory is a new phenomenon" (2009, p. 390).

3. Methodology

In the last century, newspapers have been the main source for most media content research and research about nationalism. Thus, they can flag nationhood in more than one way. One prominent way is through their structure, presenting a world composed of nations. A further mode depends on the use of *deixes*, such as "we", "us", "here" etc. This presents a sort of mutual recognition between the readers and gives them the imaginary feeling of a national homeland (Billig, 1995; Yumul and Özkirimli, 2000).

A survey of fifty-six online information portals in total – eight national portals from each of the seven former Yugoslav countries (Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia) – was conducted in October and November

2020. In this investigation, we opted for online information portals, because according to given indicators and statistics (see Mills, 2002; Diamandaki, 2003), internet portals have nowadays replaced the role that newspapers previously held for readers. Additionally, they offer discussions, dialogues, and connections to be shaped between different territorially-separated individuals who, on this basis, form imaginary groups and are adapted to their diasporic positions and interests (Appadurai, 1996, p. 195).

Over the course of the survey of the above-mentioned representative sample of portals, we wanted to gain an insight into how and to what extent "*Balkanism"* and regional identity are represented in national media. Due to the large number of researched online portals, which mainly focus on news portal subheadings, it should be highlighted that the object of the research is a much more widespread form of banal nationalism, as related to a comprehensive regional construction of the "Balkans". Moreover, this claim is underlined by the fact that the operationalization of "Balkanism" in the study itself is very broad, including the former Yugoslavia, the region, the Balkans, etc.

For purposes of this research, media content analysis was used. The main focus was on spatial references (toponyms/geonyms, adverbs, and names of the area, such as "region", "ExYu", "Balkan", "Home", "Homeland", "Nation") (De Cillia et al., 1999; Edensor, 2002; Skey, 2011), and the symbols and deictic expression (Billig, 1995) of nationhood as opposed to the region. The starting hypothesis was that regional identity is non-existent in Slovenian and Croatian online information portals, as opposed to in other former Yugoslav countries where this regional identity is quite visible.

Through a media analysis of the discourse of banal nationalism, and the role of regional toponyms on internet portals, we explored the following categories and quantitative indicators of Billig's banal nationalism:

Table 1. Categories and quantitative indicators

Deixes	**Research questions**
Region	Is the section "Region" given in the online portal? This includes synonyms such as "Balkans", "Ex-Yu" (Ex-Yugoslavia)
Neighbouring Countries	Do they report on the neighbouring countries, namely the Ex-Yu countries?
Language	Do they also report in minority languages?

EU section	Is there a section for EU matters and affairs?
Nationhood	Is this indicator highlighted in these countries?
Own Country	Do they have a section that highlights their own country?
Other	Observations arising during the course of research

Source: The authors' own representation.

The online portals we selected (see Appendix I) are, according to different internet sources and statistics[1], considered to be the most read in each of the countries analysed. We also tried to determine the political spectrum of the online portals under analysis, but in some countries it was not possible to determine this because of the lack of information. For this reason, it was not selected as one of the criteria in the analysis of internet portals.

With the indicator "*region"*, we wanted to investigate the extent to which regional affiliation is highlighted in each country and its media: i.e., whether there are special sections and categories on the internet portals intended strictly for former Yugoslav states and how they are titled. The second indicator, "*Neighbouring countries"*, will show us if and in what measure these countries are connected with their neighbours, especially if some of the country's ethnic minorities form a majority in the neighbouring state(s) or if both states share cultural and historical relations. Language is also a common denominator of banal nationalism, because writing in one language can imaginarily connect a community of people belonging to the same language and nation (Billig, 1995; Yumul and Özkirimli, 2000). In this research, the focus was also on European themes or the so-called "*banal Europeanism*", so the indicator "*EU"* will show us if any of the portals have a special rubric dedicated to topics from the European Union. The indicator "*Nationhood*" will show how much focus and space the portals give to national and local topics, while the indicator "*Other*" will highlight observations made during the research. Through these indicators, we will try to see the way in which, primarily through geographical toponyms, the Balkans as an imaginary area is woven into the media of the former Yugoslav states.

3.1. Serbia

Using the internet page "RS Portals – svi srpski portali na jednom mestu (RS Portals - all Serbian portals in one place)" for the analysis of the topic, we decided to analyse the content of eight online portals, which are classified as general information and are the most visited

Serbian online portals. In order, these are: Politika, Blic, Alo, Novosti, B92, Telegraf, Dnevno, and Informer. It should be emphasized that the portals Alo, Blic and Informer are considered right-wing populist tabloid portals[2], while Politika is described as the website of the oldest and most influential daily newspaper in Serbia (RS portal, 2020). Other portals are primarily characterised as online information portals (ibid).

On the sample of eight selected online information portals, only one (Blic) does not have a special section about the region. Most of the portals use the word "*Region*" (Politika, Alo, Novosti, B92), while some use different words to describe it, such as "*Jugosfera*" (Telegraf), "*Balkan*" (Informer), and "*EXYU*" (Dnevno). When it comes to indicators about matters internal to the country itself ("*Nationhood*"), all of them except B92 divide their news between "*Serbia*" and "*Belgrade*", while Blic also has a special category ("*Vojvodina*") for the daily happenings in this autonomous province. The indicator "*Neighbouring countries*" shows that only one portal (Novosti) has a special section called "*Montenegro*". Tracking the indicator "*EU*", it is clear that just one portal (B92), has a section dedicated to happenings in the European Union, while the indicator "*language*" shows that all of the news on the portals is written in Serbian, the official language; in Politika the news is written in both the Latin and the Cyrillic alphabets. The last indicator included in this research was "*Other*", where both Blic and Novosti have a special section about Republika Srpska (one of the two entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina), while Alo and B92 have special sections dedicated to Kosovo. Alo is also the only portal that has a section called "Ruske vesti (*Russian news)*".

Table 2. Serbian portals

Online Portals	Region	Neighbouring Countries	Language	EU	Nationhood	Own Country	Other
Politika	Region	-	-	-	-	Beograd[3]	-
Blic	-	-	-	-	-	Srbija, Vojvodina, Beograd	Srpska info
Alo	Region	-	-	-	-	Srbija, Beograd	Russian news, Kosovo question
Novosti	Region	Montenegro	-	-	-	Beograd, Srbija	Srpska republic
B92	Region	-	-	EU	-	Lokalno	Kosovo
Dnevno	EXYU	-	-	-	-	Beograd, Srbija	-

Informer	Balkan	-	-	-	-	Beograd, Srbija	-
Telegraf	Jugosphere	-	-	-	-	Beograd, Srbija	-

Source: The authors' own representation.

3.2. Croatia

Using the internet site "HR Portali – Svi hrvatski portali na jednom mjestu (HR Portals –All Croatian portals in one place)" for the media analysis of the topic, the following online information portals were selected: Večernji list, Jutarnji list, 24sata, Index, Dnevno, Direktno, 7dnevno, Telegram. While Index, Jutarnji list, and Telegram are considered to be left-oriented, the Dnevno and 7dnevno are considered by the Croatian public to be right-oriented sensationalist multimedia portals. Direktno is held to be an information portal intended for a conservative audience, while 24sata is a left-populist tabloid (HR portals, 2020).

For the sample of eight selected Croatian online information portals, research has shown us that only two of them (Index and Dnevno) meet the criteria of the indicator "*region*". Following the indicator "*Neighbouring countries*", only Večernji list has a section called "*Večernji BiH*", which leads to a separate page for Bosnia and Herzegovina. The indicator "*language*" shows that all of the portals only have news in the official national language, Croatian, whilst only Index and Direktno have an "*EU*" section where they write about news and topics from the European Union. When it comes to the national and local level, the indicator "*nationhood*" shows that Večernji list leads here, with sections such as: "Domovina (*Homeland)*", "Hrvatska (*Croatia)*", "Hrvatska kakvu trebamo (*Croatia as we need it)*", " Digitalna Hrvatska (*Digital Croatia)*", which are also examples of deixes. The second portal focusing on local and national topics is Jutarnji list, containing the categories "*Zagreb*", "Potres (*Earthquake)"* and *"Vir*". While the rubric "Earthquake" focuses on the then recent earthquakes in Zagreb, Petrinja and surrounding places, the section "*Vir*" reports on occasional events from the Croatian island which bears that name. On other portals, the news is mostly divided into the following categories: "Homeland/Croatia" and "Zagreb". The last selected indicator, "*Other*", shows that of the eight portals, three of them (Dnevno, Direktno and 7dnevno) have a section called "Vjera (*Religion)*", dedicated to the Catholic community in Croatia. Furthermore, the tabloid *24sata* additionally contains a section called "Nestali u domovinskom ratu (*Missing in the Homeland War)*", dedicated to the soldiers and locals who went missing during the Croatian War of Independence. Additionally, Večernji list also

contains a page "Moja Hrvatska (*My Croatia)*", dedicated to Croatian emigrants, while the portal Telegram is not subject to any given indicator except "*Other*", where one can find sections such as "Politika i criminal (*Politics and Crime*)".

Table 3. Croatian portals

Online Portals	Region	Neighbouring Countries	Language	EU	Nationhood	Own Country	Other
Večernji list	-	BiH	-	-	-	Homeland, Croatia, Croatia as we need it, Digital Croatia	My Croatia
Jutarnji list	-	-	-	-	-	Zagreb, Earthquake, Vir	-
24sata	-	-	-	-	-	Croatia	Missing (in the Homeland War)
Index.hr	Region	-	-	EU	-	Croatia, Zagreb	-
Dnevno	Region	-	-	-	-	Croatia, Homeland, Zagreb	Religion
Direktno	-	-	-	EU and the world	-	Homeland, Zagreb	Religion
7dnevno	-	-	-	-	-	Homeland	Religion
Telegram	-	-	-	-	-	-	Politics and crime

Source: The authors' own representation.

3.3. Slovenia

According to the results from the "MOSS - merjenje obiskanosti spletnih strani" web page (MOSS - measuring website traffic), the following information portals for media content analysis were selected: 24ur, Siol.net, Slovenske novice, Žurnal 24, Delo, Dnevnik, Mladina, and Reporter. While Mladina, Žurnal 24, Delo and Dnevnik are considered to be liberal, Siol.net, Slovenske novice and Reporter are more right-wing oriented.[4]

For the given indicators, none of the selected portals has a section dedicated to former Yugoslav states or a section dedicated to topics about the EU. When it comes to other

indicators, almost none of them are represented. The only represented indicator, "*Nationhood*", shows that all portals except Mladina divide their news between local news (Slovenia) and world news. Delo is also the only internet portal which has a special section called "30 let Slovenijhe (*30 years of Slovenia)*", where they write about the independence of Slovenia in 1991 and the events which led to it.

Table 4. Slovenian portals

Online Portals	Region	Neighbouring Countries	Language	EU	Nationhood	Own Country	Other
24ur	-	-	-	-	-	Slovenia	-
Siol.net	-	-	-	-	-	Slovenia	-
Slovenske novice	-	-	-	-	-	Doma, Na tujem	-
Žurnal24	-	-	-	-	-	Slovenia	-
Delo	-	-	-	-	-	Slovenia, 30 years of Slovenia	-
Dnevnik	-	-	-	-	-	Slovenia	-
Mladina	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Reporter	-	-	-	-	-	Slovenia	-

Source: The authors' own representation.

3.4. Montenegro

The portals selected for analysis in Montenegro are based on the page "Crnogorski portali na jednom mjestu - Montenegrin portals in one place", which were compared with the portals that had the most followers on social media. This selection was made due to the lack of statistics and information on which sections are the most read. The Montenegrin media space is quite liberal and enables the free access and use of both local and foreign sources and information. However, for some of the portals (Cafe del Montenegro, Analitika, Crnogorski Portal, and Borba), the political ideology remains unclear. Vijesti and Pobjeda are considered to be centre to centre-left, Aktuelno.me is a left-wing portal and Dan is a centre-right to right-wing online portal.

From the eight examined Montenegrin portals, only Crnogorski Portal does not contain any of the selected indicators, while Pobjeda has only one dedicated to its own country ("Crnom Gorom"). The rest of the six portals examined contain the indicator "*region*", under the

synonyms "*Region*" or "*Balkan*" (Vijesti and Dan). Three of them (Dan, Borba, and Analitika) also contain the indicator "*Neighbouring countries*". Analitika, however, lists each post-Yugoslav country separately. The indicators "*Republic*" and "*EU*" were not found in the investigated portals. They also do not report in other languages, and thus no minority languages are represented.

Table 5. Montenegrin portals

Online Portals	Region	Neighbouring Countries	Language	EU	Nationhood	Own Country	Other
Vijesti	Balkan	-	-	-	-	-	-
Pobjeda	-	-	-	-	-	Crnom Gorom	-
Aktuelno.me	Region	-	-	-	-	Crna Gora	-
Dan	Region Balkan	Serbia	-	-	-	Podgorica	MNE Region, Russia, Ukraine
CDM	Region	-	-	-	-	-	-
Analitika	Region	-	-	-	-	-	Lists each post-YU country separately
Crnogorski Portal	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Borba	Region	Serbia, Republika Srpska	-	-	-	-	Black Chronicle

Source: The authors' own representation.

3.5. Bosnia and Herzegovina

The online portals for Bosnia and Herzegovina were selected from "Internet Portali BiH (Internet Portals in BiH)". For reasons of representativeness, the following eight were chosen from different political spectra. Dnevni Avaz and Dnevni list are considered to be centre-right; Slobodna Bosna, Nezavisne Novine, and Klix are considered to be left-wing; Oslobodjenje is centre-left; Glas Srpske right-wing, while Vijesti.ba remains undetermined.

All eight examined portals in Bosnia and Herzegovina contain the indicator "*Region*", while Dnevne Novine lists it under the synonym "*Ex-Yu*". When it comes to the "*own country*" section, each of them – apart from Dnevni Avaz and Slobodna Bosna – lists the reports under

different synonyms. Oslobodjenje has two sections: "*BiH*", where it lists all cantons separately as a subsection, as well as one "*Moja BiH*" (My BiH). Nezavisne Novine has "*BiH*" and "*Gradovi*" (Cities). Klix has "*BiH*" and "*Republika Srpska*". None of these has the indicator "*Republik*". Glas Srpske lists "*Serbia*" as a "*neighbouring country*", while only Dnevni Avaz also reports in "*English*". Dnevni List is the only portal in the group with a special indicator devoted to the "*EU*".

Table 6. Bosnian portals

Online Portals	Region	Neighbouring Countries	Language	EU	Nationhood	Own Country	Other
Dnevni Avaz	Region	-	English	-	-	-	-
Oslobodjenje	Region	-	-	-	-	BiH, Moja BiH	Cantons separately
Nezavisne Novine	Ex-Yu	-	-	-	-	BiH, Gradovi	-
Glas Srpske	Region	Serbia	-	-	-	Banja Luka	-
Slobodna Bosna	Region	-	-	-	-	-	-
Klix	Region	-	-	-	-	BiH, Republika Srpska	-
Dnevni List	Region	-	-	EU	-	BiH	-
Vijesti.ba	Region	-	-	-	-	BiH	-

Source: The authors' own representation.

3.6. Kosovo

Based on the number of followers, the portals for analysis from Kosovo were selected from many different sources such as scientific papers as well as social media. Given that the media outlets in such a small country are numerous and very diverse due to the extended rights for minority communities that comprise seven percent of the population, we only chose the portals that report at the national level: Kosova Press, Koha Ditore, Gazeta Express, Bota Sot, Epoka e RE, Kosova Sot, Telegrafi, and Lajmi.net. However, the political alignment of all of these portals remains undetermined.

In this analysis, Kosovo represents a somewhat unique case. Although the indicator "*Region*" can only be found in two portals, Kosova Press and Lajmi.net, it turns out that the definition of the region has a slightly different meaning. Kosova Press reports about the

countries in the region apart from BiH; at the time this research was carried out, Serbia comes up only in relation to Kosovo. In the section "*Region*" on Lajmi.net, there are also reports on activities in Greece. In Koha Ditore, however, the activities in and related to Kosovo are found under the section "*Arberi*", an old name for Albania until around the eighteenth century (Frashëri, 1964). Listed under this section too is news about Montenegro and North Macedonia. News about Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Slovenia which is not directly related to Kosovo is listed under section "*Bota*" (World). Bota Sot also reports very little about Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and activities in Croatia are reported only in relation to Kosovo. News about Montenegro and Slovenia can be found under the general section "*Lajme*" (News). Under the indicator for its own country, "*Kosova*" comes up in Koha Ditore and Telegrafi, whereas it appears as "*Nacionale*" (national matters) on Lajmi.net. Reports about "*neighbouring countries*" are labelled "*Albania"* and "*North Macedonia*" in only three of the portals (Gazeta Express, Bota Sot, and Telegrafi). Only Kosova Press also reports the news in English and in Serbian; the others only do so in the country's national language, Albanian. The name of the portal Gazeta Express might give the erroneous impression that the portal might also be in English, since it contains the English word "Express". The other two indicators, "*EU*" and "*Republic*", do not appear at all on any of the portals.

Table 7. Kosovan portals

Online Portals	Region	Neighbouring Countries	Language	EU	Nationhood	Own Country	Other
Kosova Press	-	-	English, Serbian	-	-	-	-
Koha Ditore	-	-	-	-	-	Kosova	Arberi, Montenegro, North Macedonia,
Gazeta Express	-	Albania, North Macedonia	-	-	-	-	-
Bota Sot	-	Albania, North Macedonia	-	-	-	-	Little about Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina
Epoka e RE	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Kosova Sot	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Telegrafi	-	Albania, North	-	-	-	Kosova	-

		Macedonia					
Lajmi.net	Region	-	-	-	-	-	Greece

Source: The authors' own representation.

3.7. North Macedonia

As with the case of Kosovo, the portals of North Macedonia were selected from many different sources. Information-gathering research was carried out using scientific articles, on social media, and through consulting local journalists. However, assessment of the respective political spectrum remains incomplete. The chosen portals are: Nova Makedonija, Vecer, Sloboden Pechat, Nezavisen Vesnik, Fokus, Time Republika, and Kurir. Four of the selected portals did not yield any information about their political ideology; nevertheless, sufficient input was gathered to determine that Nova Makedonija and Vecer are centrist portals, while Sloboden Pechet and Nezavisen Vesnik are centre-left portals.

Among the North Macedonian portals researched, only Fokus does not meet any criteria of the specified indicators. The seven other portals contain the indicator "*region*" under the synonyms "*Region*" or "*Balkan*" as well as their "*own country*", and four of them (Sloboden Pechat, Nezavisen Vesnik, Time and Republika) also reference the capital city, "*Skopje*". Time and Kurir have a separate section for the indicator "*Republic*". The indicators "*Neighbouring countries*" and "*EU*" are not present in any of the selected portals. Compared to the other countries analysed in this paper, North Macedonia is the country with the most foreign and minority language reporting. In addition to Macedonian, Sloboden Pechat reports in Albanian, Turkish, Bulgarian, Greek, and English; Time appears in Serbian; Republika publishes in English and Albanian; and Kurir also presents material in English.

Table 8. North Macedonian portals

Online Portals	Region	Neighbouring Countries	Language	EU	Nationhood	Own Country	Other
Nova Makedonija	Region, Balkan	-	-	-	-	Makedonija	Covid-19
Vecer	Balkan	-	-	-	-	Makedonija	-
Sloboden Pechat	Region	-	Albanian, Turkish, Bulgarian, Greek, English	-	-	Makedonija, Skopje	-
Nezavisen Vesnik	Balkan	-	-	-	-	Makedonija, Skopje	-
Fokus	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Time	Balkan	-	Serbian	-	Republik	Makedonija, Skopje	-
Republika	Balkan	-	English, Albanian	-	-	Makedonija, Skopje	-
Kurir	Region	-	English	-	Republic	Makedonija	-

Source: The authors' own representation.

4. Conclusion

This paper examines the connection of "banal nationalism" and regional toponyms through the lens of national online media portals in all post-Yugoslav countries. It is based on the assumption that "Balkan" identity is not as pronounced in Slovenia and Croatia as it is in the other five post-Yugoslav countries; this seems to be due to the first two countries being full members of the EU. The EU candidate (Montenegro, Serbia and North Macedonia) and potential candidate countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo) identify strongly with the term "Balkans", even though they are different from each other.

For this research, we examined fifty-six online portals in total, namely eight online portals in each country. We looked at sections containing the indicators "*Region*" (with synonyms "*Balkans"* and "*EX-YU*"); "*Neighbouring countries*"; "*Language"*; "*EU"*; "*Republic"*; and "*Own Country*"; and we noticed further details which were summarised in "*Other*". From the results obtained, it can be concluded that Croatia and Slovenia are clearly trying to erase the connotations of Balkan identity. In Kosovo, the news there shows that the concept of nationhood is more related to Albanian identity, linked to the so-called "Greater Albania" and this can be noticed under the indicator "*Arberi*", where items from Montenegro and North Macedonia are listed. The two latter countries both have Albanian minorities and the region populated by Albanians is considered to still bear that name. Table 9 below shows the final results obtained for each researched state and category.

Table 9. Final results

56 Portals – 8 in each	Region	Neighbouring Countries	Language	EU	Republic	Nationhood
Serbia	7	1	0	1	0	8
Croatia	2	2	0	2	0	7
Slovenia	0	0	0	0	0	7
Montenegro	6	2	0	0	0	3

BiH	8	1	1	1	0	6
Kosovo	2	3	1	0	0	3
North Macedonia	7	0	4	0	2	7

Source: The authors' own representation.

In Slovenian online portals, the indicator "*Region*" was not found, while in Croatia it comes up only in two subheadings. From the rest of the indicators, Slovenia reports only about its "*own country*". Only one Croatian online portal reports on its "*own country*"; while the two report on "*EU*" topics. The indicator "*Region*" appears in all of the online portals in Bosnia and Herzegovina; in seven online portals in Serbia; in seven online portals in North Macedonia; in six online portals in Montenegro, and in only two online portals in Kosovo. Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina report only one online portal with information about "*neighbouring countries*", while Montenegro has two; Kosovo three; and North Macedonia lacks a separate section for these. Reports in "*other languages*" are also rare in the region. There is only one online portal in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Kosovo for "*other languages*"; North Macedonia leads in this case with four multilingual portals. The "*EU*" section comes up in one portal in Serbia and in one portal in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The term "*Republic*" is only seen in two North Macedonian portals. When it comes to sections about the "*own country*", in Serbia, all of the portals have a section for their "*own country*"; North Macedonia has seven; Bosnia and Herzegovina has six portals, and Montenegro and Kosovo only three online portals with this information. Thus, this analysis confirms the initial hypothesis that the Balkan regional identity, at least in terms of geographical toponyms associated with the identification of space, is not expressed in Slovenia and Croatia which are EU member states. Although this article does not cover the broader area of banal nationalism in the Balkans or the successor states of Yugoslavia, it analyses details regarding the existence of regional identity in Western Balkan media, opening up additional space for the study of regional identification through the prism of national media.

Notes

[1] Explained for each state separately in a later analysis.
[2] Information obtained from the portal "RS Portals- svi srpski portal na jednom mestu".
[3] Translation: Srbija (Serbia), Beograd (Belgrade), Lokalno (local)
[4] This information was obtained through conversations with several Slovenian journalists.

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Appendix: Online portals researched

Countries	Online Portals
1) Serbia	Politika, Blic, Alo, Kurir, B92, Dnevno, Informer, Telegraf
2) Croatia	Večernji List, Jutarnji List, 24 Sata, Index.hr, Dnevno.hr, Direktno.hr, 7dnevno.hr, Telegram
3) Slovenia	24ur, Siol.net, Slovenske novice, Žurnal24, Delo, Dnevnik, Mladina, Reporter.si
4) Montenegro	Vijesti, Pobjeda, Aktuelno.me, Dan, CDM, Analitika, Crnogorski Portal, Borba
5) Bosnia and Herzegovina	Dnevni Avaz, Oslobodjenje, Nezavisne Novine, Glas Srpske, Slobodna Bosna, Klix, Dnevni List, Vijesti.ba
6) Kosovo	Kosova Press, Koha Ditore, Gazeta Express, Bota Sot, Epoka e Re, Kosova Sot, Telegrafi, Lajmi.net
7) North Macedonia	Nova Makedonija, Vecer, Sloboden Pechat, Nezavisen Vesnik, Fokus, Time, Republika, Kurir

Source: The authors' own representation.