



REPRESENTATION AND PERCEPTION CONSTRUCTION OF BALKAN GEOPOLITICS IN WESTERN MEDIA'S NEWS DISCOURSES

Burçak Kadioğlu

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- What are the main discursive patterns and framing strategies employed by Western media in representing Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia?
- How do these representational practices contribute to the “othering” of the region’s countries and to the reinforcement of the West’s normative superiority?
- In what ways do media discourses play a role in legitimizing the Balkan policies of international actors such as the EU and NATO?
- How do Western media representations of the Balkans shape political, cultural, and strategic perceptions of the region?

The Balkan region has historically been a geopolitical arena for competition among major powers, a reality that also been reflected in the discourse of Western media. The media functions not merely as a tool conveying information but as an ideological filter that shapes social consciousness, geopolitical imaginaries, and power dynamics in international relations. In this context, the way Western-centric media organizations represent the Balkans is not simply a matter of news reporting, but one of constructing and legitimizing hegemonic narratives.

This analysis aims to critically examine the Western media discourse on Balkan geopolitics. Focusing particularly on the cases of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, it scrutinizes media practices that construct the region as an “unstable”, “fragile”, and “intervention-prone” geography. The study investigates how such representations influence the international positioning, domestic politics, and collective memory of the countries in the region, and seeks to uncover the power relations embedded in this process.

Representational Practices of Western Media: The Construction of Opposing Poles

In this analysis, it is revealed that the Western media outlets examined (BBC, DW, Euronews) employ a series of consistent and systematic discursive patterns when framing Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. When considered within the context of Robert Entman's, framing theory, these patterns selectively emphasize certain aspects of the events, providing an interpretive framework that renders the news meaningful for the audience.

The "Suspicious Strategic Partner" Framework for Serbia: Serbia's representation is constructed around a fundamental dilemma between its potential integration with the West (EU) and its strategic ties to the East (Russia and China). This framework is reinforced by the codes of "seeking strategic balance" and "geopolitical risk". For example, while the EU accession process is communicated in technical language emphasizing Western conditions such as "reform", "conditional progress" and "convergence", energy cooperation with Russia or Chinese investments is framed as "dependence", "deviation from Western values", and "security threats". This framing reduces Serbia to a "suspect partner", an entity subjected to constant loyalty tests and viewed with suspicion regarding its reliability, rather than as an autonomous geopolitical actor. Furthermore, the persistent emphasis on themes such as "authoritarianism", "democratic regression", and "media pressure" in domestic politics

reinforces this suspicion, portraying the country as perpetually deficient and flawed relative to Western normative standards.

The "Passive Crisis Area" Framework for Bosnia and Herzegovina: The representation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is almost entirely grounded in pathological discourse. The country is portrayed as being in a fundamental state of crisis, characterized as "unstable", "ethnically divided", and "fragile". This framework is reinforced by elements such as "ethnic tension", "secessionism" (particularly in Republika Srpska) and "the impasse created by the Dayton Agreement". Such representation renders Bosnia and Herzegovina's complex internal political dynamics, historical context, and the existence of civil society invisible, presenting the country as a "passive space" unable to determine its own destiny and dependent on external intervention (EU, NATO, UN etc.). News coverage of the justified commemoration and pursuit of justice regarding the Srebrenica genocide emphasizes victimhood yet tragically contributes to the country being depicted as a "victim-state", "trapped in its traumatic past" and lacking the capacity to build a future. This constitutes a depiction that effectively erases the country's political subjectivity.

Othering and the Reinforcement of Hegemonic Supremacy

These representational practices go beyond mere journalism and function as a mechanism of othering, which should be examined in the context of postcolonial and

critical discourse analysis theories. Maria Todorova's concept of "Balkanism" elucidates how the Balkans were constructed by the West as a "buffer zone", positioned between "civilization" and "barbarism" at Europe's civilized borders. The media discourses analyzed here represent contemporary manifestations of this construction.

The portrayal of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a "passive crisis zone" and Serbia as a "suspicious partner" positions these countries in direct opposition to the West's self-constructed "we". Within this framing, the Balkans are depicted as disorderly, unpredictable, and mired in internal conflicts -qualities that either threaten the West's rational, stable, and democratic order (as in the case of Serbia) or justify the need for external correction and management (as in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina). As Edward Said's Orientalism elucidates, such representations enable the West to define and legitimize its own identity through the projection of negative traits onto the "other".

In this process, concepts such as "democracy", "rule of law", "stability", and "media freedom" are presented as universal and absolute truths, thereby normalizing the West's normative and moral superiority. Consequently, Balkan countries are discursively positioned as entities that must continuously "conform", "reform", and "adapt" to these standards. The linguistic strategies employed by the media reinforce a "teacher-student" or "patient-doctor" dichotomy, in which the West appears as the ultimate

source of knowledge and solutions, while the Balkans are portrayed as a problematic space in need of guidance and rectification. Such a representational hierarchy sustains a hegemonic discourse that privileges one-sided authority over critical dialogue.

The Political Legitimization Function of Media Discourse

Media discourse serves as a crucial instrument of soft power and public opinion formation in international relations. By framing specific issues -such as ethnic conflict, foreign intervention, and authoritarianism- as existential threats, the media places them outside the boundaries of normal politics, thereby legitimizing extraordinary measures such as intervention, sanctions, and intensive monitoring.

Presenting Bosnia and Herzegovina as a "fragile state" and a "permanent crisis" legitimizes the continuation of a guardianship regime maintained by the international community (particularly through the EU etc.) and endowed with extraordinary powers. Similarly, the discourse surrounding "Russia's hybrid threat" or the "risk of instability" paves the way for NATO to expand its presence in the region and to frame its military exercises within a "preemptive security" paradigm. The media frames these policies as technical and necessary measures, thereby concealing the underlying geopolitical interests and power struggles.

Framing Serbia's "search for geopolitical balance" as a risk legitimizes the EU's

enlargement policy and the principle of conditionality applied to Serbia. Through media discourse, the EU can present its reform demands to candidate countries as part of a “civilizing mission”. Associating the country with the discourse of “authoritarianism” facilitates its use as a tool of political pressure in negotiations by foregrounding the EU’s democracy and human rights agenda. In this context, the media functions as an echo chamber that reinforces the EU’s normative power.

The Political and Cultural Positioning of the Balkans through the Media

Western media representations of the Balkans not only reflect political realities but also construct cultural and strategic meanings about the region. In media discourse, the Balkans are portrayed as a region juxtaposed with the West’s civilizational narrative and within this framework, continuously depicted as being in need of “rehabilitation”. This dynamic is presented as a “process of completion” at both the political level (reform, security, democratization) and the cultural level (modernity, alignment with Western values). Thus, Western media functions as a discursive instrument in shaping strategic perceptions of the region.

From a political perspective, the Balkans are represented in the news in ways that align with the foreign policy priorities of the West. Themes such as security risks, democratic backsliding, and economic de-

pendency reinforce the notion that Western intervention is both necessary and inevitable. In doing so, the media contributes to the legitimization of specific foreign policy orientations toward the region within the international public sphere. In this regard, the media functions not merely as a transmitter of events but as a hegemonic apparatus that reproduces political discourse.

From cultural perspective, media representations construct a cultural hierarchy by defining Balkan identity through the Western standards of modernity. This hierarchy positions the West as the “norm-setter” while framing the Balkans as a cultural space that needs to be “completed”. At the strategic level, such representations depict the region’s integration into Western alliances as both “natural” and “necessary”. Ultimately, the media assumes an ideological role that reinforces the West’s geopolitical imagination, shapes perceptions of the region, and legitimizes interventionist policies at the international level—both politically and culturally.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This analysis once again confirms that Western media discourse on Balkan geopolitics is deeply infused with ideological and hegemonic codes. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia have evolved into discursive spaces through which the West constructs its own narratives of identity, superiority, and security—beyond being mere geographical entities. The frameworks of the “suspicious partner” and the

“passive crisis area” simplify the complex realities of the countries, positioning them as objects within the West’s normative and geopolitical imagination. This process fundamentally undermines the media’s claim to neutrality and repositions it as an active producer of power relations. In light of these findings, the following policy recommendations are proposed as a concrete action plan for establishing a more equitable and pluralistic regime of representation:

Empowering Alternative Media and Local Narratives

Balancing the one-dimensional representational structure shaped by Western-centric media discourse is only possible through the empowerment of alternative media networks and local narrative practices. When local media organizations produce content grounded in their own historical, cultural, and political contexts, the reproduction of externally constructed perceptions about the region can be curtailed. In this regard, supporting independent media networks and enhancing regional cooperation among Balkan countries are of critical importance in challenging the West’s discursive monopoly. Alternative narratives not only foster informational diversity but also render the subjective experiences and cultural dynamics of regional societies more visible. Such efforts would contribute to establishing a more balanced and pluralistic representational order within the international media environment.

Critical Media Literacy and Awareness

Developing critical media literacy at the societal level is essential for deconstructing the ideological frameworks embedded in media discourse. In historically “othered” regions such as the Balkans, fostering a public consciousness that questions media messages and recognizes the political functions of language can help mitigate the influence of externally imposed representational patterns. Expanding programs that promote media awareness within educational institutions and civil society initiatives enables individuals to perceive news not merely as a source of information but as ideological texts that construct meaning. In this way, critical media literacy becomes a site of social resistance that challenges the passive reception of hegemonic discourses and encourages more conscious and reflective media consumption.

Comparative and Independent Research

Analyzing the discourse practices of Western media should not be confined to a one-dimensional perspective; there is a need for independent and comparative research that examines the discourses of media organizations from different regions. Such studies are significant as they reveal how Western-centered patterns of representation are reproduced on a global scale or where they diverge. Collaborative efforts among universities, think tanks, and

independent research centers will facilitate a more comprehensive and multidimensional analysis of media discourse. In particular, the active involvement of local scholars and researchers from the Balkan countries in these processes will foster the development of more balanced, original, and locally grounded perspectives on the region.

International Media Responsibility and Transparency

Global media organizations should adhere more rigorously to the principles of ethical responsibility, source transparency, and discursive impartiality in their news production processes to ensure fair representation at the international level. The influence of Western-centric media outlets on global public opinion demonstrates that they function not merely as conveyors of information but also as agents of perception-shaping. Therefore, the news policies, linguistic choices, and source selection practices of international media organizations should be made subject to public scrutiny. Establishing accountability mechanisms within the media will foster more ethical and balanced news production, particularly in the context of conflict zones and politically sensitive regions.

Academic and Cultural Dialogues

Enhancing academic and cultural interactions plays a crucial role in transforming one-sided perceptions of the Balkans. Academic partnership, exchange programs,

joint symposiums, and cultural productions (films, literature, documentaries, etc.) between the countries of the region and the West can create a multifaceted platform for dialogue. Such interactions contribute both to the critical examination of media-produced representation patterns and to the development of alternative perspectives on the region. Academic and cultural dialogues not only facilitate the exchange of knowledge but also strengthen mutual understanding and empathy. Consequently, the representation of the Balkans in the Western public sphere can shift from a one-dimensional geopolitical image to a more human, multi-layered perspective grounded in mutual recognition.

In conclusion, challenging the hegemonic representations of Balkan geopolitics in Western media is crucial not only for a more equitable media order but also for enabling the countries of the region to reclaim their subjectivities and voices on the international stage. The policy recommendations presented above outline concrete steps that can be taken in this direction and will contribute to the construction of a more balanced, pluralistic, and critical global public sphere. Combating hegemonic media discourses is not merely a matter of accurate journalism; it is also about the Balkan peoples asserting their right to define their own identities, histories, and futures. This proposed multidimensional approach constitutes a vital step toward realizing this right and establishing genuine pluralism in the global public sphere.

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Printed by: Ajgraf

Cite this paper: Kadioğlu, B. (2026), Representation and Perception Construction of Balkan Geopolitics in Western Media's News Discourses, BSF Perspective, Skopje: IDEFE Publications.

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