

*Preliminary communication*

## **BEYOND POLITICAL: TOURISM (RE)SHAPING THE IMAGE OF THE BALKANS**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the evolution of the Balkans' historically negative image, rooted in political instability, conflict, and cultural narratives, into one that is increasingly shaped by tourism. Long perceived as a region of division and insecurity, the Balkans are undergoing a transformation fueled by the growing recognition of their cultural, historical, and natural assets. International tourism has been instrumental in altering external perceptions by promoting the region's distinct attractions and fostering a departure from a collective "Balkan" identity towards the development of unique national tourism brands. These efforts reflect a strategic reimagining of the region, positioning it as an appealing destination within global tourism networks. By analyzing the interplay between historical stigma and contemporary branding strategies, this study highlights tourism's role as a catalyst for reshaping the Balkans' image, contributing to its economic growth and global integration. This shift illustrates how tourism can redefine regional identities and challenge outdated stereotypes, presenting the Balkans as a diverse and welcoming destination.

Keywords: Balkans, image, political narratives, stereotypes, international tourism

*JEL classification:* Z32, D70, N74, R58, F59

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Balkans, a region historically associated with political instability and conflict, is currently experiencing a shift in its global image. Negative perceptions of the region, rooted in events such as the dissolution of Yugoslavia and ensuing conflicts (Porfido, 2020), have historically hindered its development as a competitive tourism destination. However, the growing recognition of the region's natural, cultural, and historical assets has contributed to its emergence as an attractive destination, initiating a transformation in its image. The significance of destination image in tourism cannot be overstated, as it directly influences tourists' perceptions, preferences, and decisions (Puh, 2014).

Destination image is conceptualized as the perception of a specific destination held by a tourist market, encompassing both cognitive evaluations of its attributes and affective impressions of its overall appeal (Aksoy & Kiyici, 2011; Aziz & Zainol, 2011). This image formation is a complex process influenced by various agents, including media, personal experiences, and word-of-mouth communication (Alvarez & Campo, 2014). As Aksoy & Kiyici (2011) emphasize, the creation of a positive tourism image

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requires significant effort and long-term strategies to align destination attributes with the expectations of tourists, thereby ensuring sustainability.

In the case of the Balkans, the climate of insecurity and political crises has delayed the tourism boom experienced by other Mediterranean countries since the 1970s (Porfido, 2020). Nonetheless, the region's relatively undiscovered status and growing appeal as a unique destination have catalyzed a period of substantial tourism growth. Effective management and promotion of the region's cultural and natural resources are essential for further enhancing its image and economic viability (Almeida-García et al., 2020). Tourism marketing plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions, as tourists are more likely to visit destinations they perceive as reliable and reputable (Jebbouri et al., 2022).

While image formation is influenced by secondary sources such as media and promotional materials, the primary image, shaped through direct personal experiences, often holds greater significance in the long term (Phelps, 1986; Gartner, W. C., 1994; Marković, 2016). As Alvarez and Campo (2014) note, international events, political crises, or natural disasters can significantly alter destination image, necessitating a resilient and adaptive approach to its management. Tourism plays a critical role in shaping the primary image of a destination, as it relies on direct personal experiences rather than mediated perceptions. Unlike secondary images formed through media or promotional materials, the primary image emerges from tourists' firsthand interactions with a destination, making it a powerful tool for rebranding. In the case of the Balkans, where historical and geopolitical events have long influenced its reputation, tourism offers a unique opportunity to reconstruct the region's image. By providing visitors with authentic experiences that highlight its natural beauty, cultural richness, and hospitality, tourism can challenge outdated perceptions and foster a more favorable and accurate understanding of the Balkans. This capacity for transformation underscores the central role of tourism in reshaping the region's global image, which is the primary focus of this paper.

## 1. THE BALKANS: ORIGINS, IDENTITIES, PERCEPTIONS

The Balkans, as a term and concept, is deeply ambiguous and contentious. Its identity and boundaries are subject to varying interpretations, shaped by geography, politics, culture, and history. This lack of clarity is evident in debates about whether the Balkans should be understood in strictly geographical terms, or if its identity should also encompass social, ethnic, cultural, and historical dimensions (Šarić, 2004).

Geographically, the Balkan Peninsula occupies a strategic position at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. It is bounded by the Adriatic, Aegean, Mediterranean, and Black Seas, with its northern edge defined by the Alpine-Carpathian Mountain folds and the rivers Danube and Sava (Kriještorac, 2018, p. 244; Petrović, 2014, p. 17). Spanning approximately 550,000 km<sup>2</sup>, this region holds significant geographic importance within the Mediterranean basin (Petrović, 2014, p. 17). Despite its advantageous location, the peninsula's political, economic, and cultural circumstances have historically undermined its potential.

The term "Balkans" is not merely a geographical designation but a cultural and political construct, heavily laden with historical and ideological significance. Emerging during the Ottoman rule, the term initially denoted southeastern Europe but has since evolved to carry negative connotations of political instability, ethnic conflict, and war. This stigmatization has framed the region as "Europe's Other," a space perceived as

temperamental, uncivilized, and distinctly different from the rational, progressive West (Koliopoulos, 2002). Maria Todorova's concept of "Balkanism" echoes Edward Said's "Orientalism," positing the Balkans as a symbolic category constructed through Western imagination. These narrative positions the region as a bridge between the "civilized" West and the "barbaric" East, yet paradoxically labels it as "quasi-European" or "quasi-Oriental" (Šarić, 2004; Todorova, 1997).

This portrayal became especially pronounced in the 19th and early 20th centuries, coinciding with the Balkan Wars and World War I. Western European travel writers and political commentators perpetuated images of the Balkans as a zone of barbarism and backwardness, with British writers like Harry de Windt sensationalizing the region as "savage Europe" (Hammond, 2004; Cameron, 2023). These depictions crystallized a dichotomy in the Western European consciousness: while the Balkans was seen as geographically part of Europe, it was culturally and politically excluded.

The external stigmatization of the Balkans has been both internalized and resisted by its inhabitants. Many nations in the region reject the "Balkan" label, associating it with backwardness and instability. Slovenia and Romania, for example, prefer to identify as "Central European," distancing themselves from the negative stereotypes attached to the Balkans (Kriještorac, 2018, p. 245). During the communist era, Yugoslavia similarly resisted identification with Eastern Europe, asserting a unique position as distinct from its Balkan neighbors and the socialist bloc (Šarić, 2004). This trend persists in the post-Cold War era, with countries striving to align with Western European norms and identities, effectively designating true Balkan countries as those not yet fully integrated into the European Union, irrespective of their geographical location, historical context, or other defining characteristics.

The geopolitical term "Western Balkans," introduced by the European Union in the early 2000s, exemplifies the region's liminal status. This designation includes countries in southeastern Europe that were not EU members or candidates at the time, emphasizing their position as "in-between"—neither fully European nor entirely Balkan (Dabrowski, 2018; Vukasović, 2018). The EU's discourse frames the Balkans as a region requiring transformation and integration to escape its "traditionally barbaric" image. This narrative reinforces the symbolic geography of the Balkans as a space of transition, yet also perpetuates its marginalization.

The notion of "Balkanization," coined in the 1920s, encapsulates the region's history of fragmentation and conflict, further solidifying its association with instability and regression (Veremis, 2015). This stigma was exacerbated by the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, which were labeled "Balkan Wars" in Western discourse, despite their localized nature. These conflicts deepened the perception of the Balkans as a space of endemic violence and non-European values, overshadowing its rich cultural and historical heritage (Dragičević Šešić & Rogač Mijatović, 2014; Šarić, 2004).

## **2. TOURISM'S ROLE IN SHAPING THE IDENTITY**

Tourism, as defined by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), is a complex social, cultural, and economic phenomenon involving the movement of people to destinations outside their usual environment for leisure or professional purposes. The activities of these travelers, termed visitors, often contribute to local and global economies through tourism expenditure (UNWTO). While commonly associated with modernity, the origins of tourism can be traced to antiquity, particularly through religious

pilgrimages. For thousands of years, individuals have traveled to sacred sites for rituals, sacrifices, or religious ceremonies, showcasing tourism's enduring cultural and social dimensions (Cristou, 2022, p. 13). By 1500 BCE, ancient Egypt demonstrated early signs of travel for curiosity and pleasure, suggesting that tourism in its rudimentary form predates modern interpretations (Casson, 2004).

Greece, a pivotal destination in antiquity, maintained its allure through subsequent eras, evolving into a cornerstone of the Grand Tour during the Enlightenment. The Napoleonic Wars further reinforced Greece's prominence, as parts of Europe became inaccessible, driving travelers to its historical and cultural landscapes (Dritsas, 2002). Greece's dual identity - first as a part of the Ottoman Empire and later as the cradle of Western civilization - drew wealthy visitors seeking both Orientalist fascination and the philosophical roots of Western thought (Dritsas, 1998).

The Industrial Revolution marked a watershed moment in tourism history, as advancements in transportation, including railways and maritime travel, revolutionized mobility. These developments facilitated the emergence of organized tours and significantly expanded access to previously remote destinations, including the East (Arslan & Ali Polat, 2015; Guillot, 2007). Parallel to these infrastructural innovations, the institutionalization of academic disciplines such as archaeology, ethnography, and philology deepened Western interest in the East, fostering cultural and intellectual exploration (Arslan & Ali Polat, 2015).

Modern tourism began to take shape in the late 19th century, punctuated by landmark events such as the 1896 Athens Olympic Games. By this time, Greece had established itself as a focal point for international tourism, evidenced by the development of luxury hotels and urban amenities (Dritsas, 1998). The Second World War and subsequent economic recovery catalyzed tourism's exponential growth, ushering in the era of mass tourism: an era characterized by increasing tourist demand for unique, individualized experiences, further redefining the dynamics of the industry (Blazheska, Ristovska, & Nakovski, 2023).

The Balkans' historical role as a transit zone, rather than a destination, underscores its peripheral status in early tourism narratives. As Todorova (1994) observes, early travelers often bypassed Southeast Europe *en route* to prominent centers like Constantinople or Jerusalem. However, the region gained prominence in the 19th century, with the advent of railway travel and the burgeoning interest in thermal therapy. Croatia's Dalmatian Riviera and Bosnia's early organized tours by Thomas Cook & Sons exemplify the Balkans' gradual integration into global tourism (Naef & Ploner, 2016).

During the socialist era, tourism in Yugoslavia flourished as a tool for both economic development and ideological projection. Yugoslav leaders recognized tourism's potential to enhance the country's image as a bridge between East and West. Tito's "come and see the truth" policy invited Western tourists to witness Yugoslavia's achievements firsthand, fostering cultural diplomacy (Tchoukarine, 2010, p. 117). Similarly, Bulgaria's strategic development of mass tourism resorts, such as Sunny Beach and Golden Sands, during the 1950s and 1960s highlights the region's adaptation to the economic imperatives of the Eastern Bloc (Ivanov & Dimitrova, 2010).

Albania offers another compelling case of tourism-driven transformation. Initially catering to its diaspora, Albania transitioned in the 2000s into a significant Mediterranean destination. With major investments in infrastructure and hospitality, the country increased its accommodation capacity tenfold between 2000 and 2019, illustrating tourism's capacity to drive economic growth (Shahidsaless et al. 2023).

The Balkans possess a distinct allure rooted in their rich historical heritage, diverse cultural traditions, and unspoiled natural landscapes. As a region often characterized by its mystique, the Balkans have become synonymous with off-the-beaten-path exploration. This image attracts modern tourists seeking authenticity, excitement, and a departure from everyday monotony (Tomka, 2014; Cvetskoska & Barišić, 2017). Destinations in the Balkans combine ancient historical sites with vibrant local cultures, offering experiences that appeal to an increasingly discerning tourist demographic (Cvetskoska & Barišić, 2017).

From the Grand Tour to modern tourism, the Balkans have continually adapted to shifting global trends, with international tourism emerging as a significant driver of economic development. As Dragičević et al. (2018) emphasize, tourism has not only contributed to economic growth but also reshaped perceptions of the region, fostering regional integration. This transition from a historically negative to a more positive international identity has been closely tied to efforts in regional cooperation (Bechev, 2004).

### 3. NATIONAL BRANDING AND GLOBAL TOURISM IN THE BALKANS

The Balkans, a historically rich and culturally diverse region, has emerged as a dynamic tourism destination in recent decades. While many Western European nations have had the advantage of decades to refine their tourism offerings, several Balkan countries only recently embraced international tourism, opening their borders after periods of political and economic instability. This late start is complicated by the region's historical layers of political, ethnic, and religious nationalism, yet it has not deterred its trajectory as a promising player in global tourism (Houliston, Ivanov & Webster, 2021).

Tourism branding is integral to shaping a region's identity and attracting international visitors. A strong destination brand reflects local values while shaping visitors' perceptions, positioning a location as both unique and appealing (Vitić & Ringer, 2008). Although tourism offers opportunities to reshape perceptions of the Balkans, the term itself carries lingering negative associations rooted in its history of conflict and division. To effectively leverage the "Balkans" as a tourism brand, a broader analysis of its meaning and the connotations it evokes is essential (Smith et al., 2018). The relationship between the Balkan name and the quality of services offered by tourism businesses is interconnected, as external factors unrelated to tourism often shape tourists' attitudes toward the region. Moreover, the definition of the Balkans remains contested, with significant variations in how countries within the region are perceived and identified. While tourists may have limited knowledge of the Balkans' history, geography, and politics, they often approach the term with preconceived notions, whether as a region, a concept, or a destination (Smith et al., 2018). In the Balkans, slogans such as Croatia's "Full of Life"<sup>2</sup> and Slovenia's "I Feel Slovenia"<sup>3,4</sup> highlight efforts to combine national identity with tourism marketing strategies.

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<sup>2</sup> Official website of the Croatian National Tourist Board: <https://croatia.hr/en-gb>

<sup>3</sup> Slovenian Tourism Board: <https://www.slovenia.info/en>

<sup>4</sup> Republic of Slovenia - Ministry of Economic Development and Technology: Government adopts the new seven-year Slovenian Tourism Strategy 2022 – 2028: <https://www.gov.si/en/news/2022-05-10-government-adopts-the-new-seven-year-slovenian-tourism-strategy-2022-2028/>

While Greece capitalizes on its established Mediterranean appeal and cultural heritage<sup>5</sup>, emerging destinations like Montenegro<sup>6</sup> and Albania<sup>7</sup> emphasize their natural beauty and sense of discovery to attract international tourists (Dritsas, 1998; Đurašević, 2015).

The interplay between identity and branding remains a complex challenge. Croatia's respondents, for instance, acknowledge the importance of national identity for positioning but note its insufficient development for differentiating the country from competitors (Đurašević, 2015). Overcoming these obstacles requires an integration of cultural narratives, both tangible and intangible, into tourism marketing. Dragičević Šešić and Rogać Mijatović propose strategies such as cultural memory routes, alternative tourism typologies, and narratives that balance the region's dissonant heritage with its authentic appeal. These approaches aim to present the Balkans as a culturally resilient and diverse tourism destination.

Tourism has become a cornerstone of economic development across the Balkans. The global tourism industry's post-pandemic recovery highlights the sector's resilience, with international arrivals growing by 11% in the first seven months of 2024 compared to 2023 (UNWTO Barometer). Within the Balkans, Greece and Croatia lead in tourist numbers and revenue, while Albania and Montenegro are rapidly gaining traction due to their Adriatic coastlines and natural attractions (Jovićić Vuković & Terzić, 2020).

North Macedonia, through its "Timeless" branding<sup>8</sup>, is leveraging its cultural and natural assets to drive sustainable tourism growth. Similarly, Montenegro has prioritized tourism as a key sector for country's economic growth branding itself as an "undiscovered pearl" of the Adriatic (Micić, Denda & Petrović, 2018; Vitić & Ringer, 2008). Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>9</sup>, with its cultural hubs like Sarajevo and Mostar, showcases the potential of historical and cultural tourism to contribute to national economic revitalization (Kudumović, 2020).

The Balkans' strength lies in its ability to cater to diverse tourism demands, from mass-market offerings to niche experiences. Greece remains a premier Mediterranean destination, blending sun-and-sea tourism with cultural and religious tourism. Bulgaria complements its Black Sea coastal resorts with a range of products<sup>10</sup>, including winter skiing, eco-tourism, spa and wellness tourism, and emerging niches such as wine and communist heritage tourism (Ivanov & Dimitrova, 2010; Yordanov, 2007).

Emerging trends in tourist behavior also drive innovation in the Balkans. Increasing demand for "unseen" destinations and personalized experiences has spurred the development of alternative tourism routes, including nostalgia tourism and discovery tourism (Blazheska, Ristovska, & Nakovski, 2023). These approaches align with modern travelers' preferences for authenticity and cultural depth. For instance, Albania integrates adventure activities like paragliding with agritourism, while Montenegro emphasizes outdoor recreation alongside historical exploration (Dragičević Šešić & Rogać Mijatović, 2014).

Efforts to promote the Balkans as a cohesive tourism region hinge on regional cooperation and the joint presentation of shared cultural heritage. As Jovićić Vuković &

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<sup>5</sup> Visit Grece: <https://www.visitgreece.gr/>

<sup>6</sup> Montenegro Travel Portal: <https://www.visit-montenegro.com/>

<sup>7</sup> Albanian Tourism Board: <https://albania.al/>

<sup>8</sup> North Macedonia's official tourism website: <https://macedonia-timeless.com/eng>

<sup>9</sup> Tourism Board of Bosnia and Herzegovina: <https://www.tourismbih.com/>

<sup>10</sup> Official Tourism Portal of Bulgaria: <https://bulgariatravel.org/>

Terzić (2020) emphasize, raising awareness of the Balkans’ collective history and integrating this into cross-border tourism products are crucial for attracting tourists from outside the region. Thematic and cultural routes, including those highlighting UNESCO World Heritage sites, offer significant potential for establishing the Balkans as a unified yet multifaceted destination.

However, the region faces challenges in sustaining its tourism growth. Political and economic transitions, infrastructural disparities, and residual effects of historical conflicts complicate efforts to build a cohesive tourism strategy. Countries like Kosovo<sup>11</sup> must balance the development of a robust tourism identity with overcoming reputational and logistical obstacles. Nonetheless, successful branding initiatives, such as Montenegro’s “Visit Montenegro” and Slovenia’s emphasis on sustainable tourism, illustrate the region’s capacity for resilience and adaptation (Đurašević, 2015; Vitić & Ringer, 2008).

**Table 1.** International tourist arrivals (in million)

Region/country	2010		2015		2019		2020		2022		2023	
World	972.81		1,204.14		1,464.96		406.37		974.86		1,304.56	
Europe	494.18		612.43		742.40		239.44		609.45		707.44	
Greece	15.01		23.60		31.35		7.37		27.84		32.74	
%	1.54	3.03	1.96	3.85	2.14	4.22	1.81	3.07	2.85	4.56	2.5	4.62
Bulgaria	6.05		7.10		7.78		1.29		5.56		N/A	
%	0.62	1.22	0.58	1.16	0.53	1.04	0.31	0.53	0.57	0.91	/	/
Serbia	0.68		1.13		1.85		0.45		1.77		2.13	
%	0.07	0.13	0.09	0.18	0.12	0.25	0.11	0.18	0.18	0.29	0.16	0.30
Croatia	9.11		12.68		17.35		5.55		15.32		N/A	
%	0.93	1.84	1.05	2.07	0.11	2.33	1.36	2.31	1.57	2.51	/	/
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0.37		0.68		1.20		0.20		0.92		N/A	
%	0.04	0.07	0.05	0.11	0.08	0.16	0.05	0.08	0.09	0.15	/	/
Albania	2.19		3.78		6.20		2.60		7.18		9.67	
%	0.22	0.44	0.31	0.61	0.42	0.83	0.64	1.08	0.73	1.17	0.74	1.36
Slovenia	2.05		3.02		4.70		1.22		3.94		N/A	
%	0.21	0.41	0.25	0.49	0.32	0.63	0.3	0.5	0.4	0.64	/	/
Montenegro	1.09		1.56		2.51		0.35		2.04		2.45	
%	0.11	0.22	0.13	0.25	0.17	0.33	0.08	0.14	0.2	0.33	0.18	0.34
Total	36.55		53.55		72.94		19.03		64.57		N/A	
%	3.75	7.39	4.44	8.74	4.97	9.82	4.68	7.94	6.62	10.59	/	/

Source: UNWTO Tourism data dashboard (2024); authors calculations

The Balkans, as part of the global tourism network, has experienced dynamic growth, profound challenges, and promising recovery over the last decade. The data from 2010 to 2023 highlights trends in international tourist arrivals, providing insights into the region’s evolving role in global and European tourism.<sup>12</sup>

Globally, international tourism experienced steady growth from 972.81 million arrivals in 2010 to a peak of 1,464.96 million in 2019, reflecting a consistent boom in global travel. However, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 led to a drastic decline, with global arrivals dropping to 406.37 million—a reduction of nearly 72% compared to 2019. Post-pandemic recovery began in 2022, with arrivals reaching 974.86 million, and continued into 2023 with 1,304.56 million, approximately 89% of pre-pandemic levels.

<sup>11</sup> Visit Kosovo: <https://visitkosovo.rks-gov.net/>

<sup>12</sup> The table provides detailed information about the number of international tourists in Balkan countries, including their percentage share of the total international tourists at both European and global levels. The data is sourced from the UNWTO Tourism and Data Dashboard (2024). Notably, while the table offers a comprehensive overview, there are certain gaps in the dataset: the figures for international tourists in North Macedonia and Kosovo are unavailable, and data for several states for the year 2023 is also missing. Despite these omissions, the available data is sufficient and highly relevant to support the argument that tourism in Balkan states is consistently progressing.

Europe, consistently accounting for nearly half of global arrivals, followed a similar trajectory. Tourist numbers increased from 494.18 million in 2010 to 742.40 million in 2019, before falling sharply to 239.44 million in 2020. By 2023, Europe's arrivals rebounded to 707.44 million, achieving 95% of its 2019 levels and underscoring its resilience as a leading global tourism hub.

Greece has solidified its position as the Balkans' tourism powerhouse, with arrivals rising from 15.01 million in 2010 to 31.35 million in 2019. While the pandemic caused a sharp decline to 7.37 million in 2020, the country rebounded strongly, surpassing pre-pandemic levels with 32.74 million arrivals in 2023. Greece's share of European arrivals rose from 3.03% in 2010 to 4.62% in 2023, highlighting its sustained appeal as a Mediterranean tourism hub known for its cultural heritage and natural beauty.

Albania has emerged as one of the fastest-growing tourism destinations in the Balkans. Arrivals increased dramatically from 2.19 million in 2010 to 6.20 million in 2019, and further to 9.67 million in 2023. This growth reflects Albania's successful promotion of its natural and cultural assets, with its share of global arrivals increasing from 0.22% in 2010 to 0.74% in 2023. The country's blend of adventure tourism, agritourism, and cultural experiences has positioned it as a versatile destination appealing to a broad audience.

Croatia has consistently been a key player in the Balkans, with arrivals increasing from 9.11 million in 2010 to 17.35 million in 2019. The pandemic caused a sharp decline to 5.55 million in 2020, but the recovery to 15.32 million in 2022 demonstrates the resilience of its tourism sector. Croatia's share of European arrivals rose from 1.84% in 2010 to 2.51% in 2022, underscoring its popularity as a summer destination for coastal and island tourism.

Montenegro has positioned itself as a growing tourism destination, with arrivals increasing from 1.09 million in 2010 to 2.51 million in 2019. Despite the pandemic's impact, which reduced arrivals to 0.35 million in 2020, the country rebounded to 2.45 million in 2023, close to the pre-pandemic levels. Montenegro's share of European arrivals grew from 0.22% in 2010 to 0.34% in 2023, reflecting its appeal as an "undiscovered pearl" with a mix of adventure, cultural, and nature-based tourism.

Serbia has demonstrated consistent growth, with arrivals increasing from 0.68 million in 2010 to 1.85 million in 2019, and further to 2.13 million in 2023. Its share of European arrivals rose modestly from 0.13% in 2010 to 0.30% in 2023, showing progress in developing its tourism industry. Serbia's diverse offerings<sup>13</sup>, including cultural heritage, gastronomy, and rural tourism, have contributed to its steady rise.

Bulgaria's arrivals increased moderately from 6.05 million in 2010 to 7.78 million in 2019, though the pandemic caused a significant drop to 1.29 million in 2020. By 2022, arrivals recovered to 5.56 million, maintaining Bulgaria's role as a consistent player in the regional tourism market. Bulgaria's offerings, including coastal, winter, and spa tourism, continue to attract visitors, albeit with modest global shares.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's arrivals rose from 0.37 million in 2010 to 1.20 million in 2019, reflecting its growing appeal as a cultural and nature-based destination. Although the pandemic reduced arrivals to 0.20 million in 2020, recovery to 0.92 million in 2022 demonstrates resilience. Key destinations such as Sarajevo and Mostar highlight the country's potential for further growth.

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<sup>13</sup> Experience Serbia: <https://www.serbia.travel/en>



Slovenia has positioned itself as a boutique tourism destination, with arrivals growing from 2.05 million in 2010 to 4.70 million in 2019. Although arrivals dropped to 1.22 million in 2020, recovery to 3.94 million in 2022 underscores its appeal as a sustainable tourism destination. Slovenia's focus on high-quality, nature-based experiences continues to attract environmentally conscious travelers.

The Balkan countries collectively saw international arrivals grow from 36.55 million in 2010 to 72.94 million in 2019, nearly doubling over a decade. While arrivals plummeted to 19.03 million in 2020, recovery to 64.57 million in 2022 highlights the region's resilience. The Balkans' share of global arrivals rose from 3.75% in 2010 to 6.62% in 2022, reflecting its growing importance as a regional tourism hub.

### REIMAGINING THE BALKANS: A CONCLUSION

Several key periods of fluctuation in the image of the Balkans can be identified:

- 19th to early 20th centuries: Establishment of a negative image, dominated by narratives of backwardness and tribalism.
- 1945–1991: Stabilization and affirmation, with attempts to reshape the region's reputation during the Cold War.
- 1991–2004: A resurgence of "Balkanization" narratives, marked by political fragmentation, instability and perceptions of backwardness.
- 2004 onwards: Identity reconstruction and Europeanization, emphasizing integration into EU and NATO frameworks and rebranding the region globally.

The Balkans, a geographically contested and politically fragmented region with an exceptionally favorable geographical position, has long been overshadowed by cultural misconceptions. These misconceptions, primarily originating from Western literature, framed the region as backward and tribal—a narrative reinforced by historical events such as the Balkan Wars and the First and Second World Wars.

Following World War II, global attention shifted away from the negative image of the Balkans as the Cold War redirected the international focus elsewhere. Although the Balkans marked the division of the Iron Curtain, it was not a focal point of Cold War conflicts, unlike Korea, Vietnam, or Afghanistan. In this relative reprieve, tourism emerged as a vehicle for slowly transforming the region's entrenched negative perceptions. By the 1970s and 1980s, Greece was already positioning itself as a global tourist powerhouse. The annual tourist trade of Greece rose from several tens of thousands in the 1920s to 2 million persons in 1974, 4 million in 1977, and 9 million in 1979 (Stoianovich, 1994). Bulgaria, aligned with the Soviet bloc, targeted tourism to cater to Eastern bloc elites, while Yugoslavia, as a non-aligned state, promoted its "Come and see the truth" doctrine, highlighting its tourist potential and openness to visitors from both East and West.

However, with the collapse of socialism and the violent breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, old narratives of Balkanization and tribalism resurged. These depictions were further amplified by global media and academic publications documenting the atrocities of the Yugoslav wars, often juxtaposing political and cultural identities with tourism symbols on their covers—an embodiment of the complex overlapping identities of the Balkans.

Even during the stabilization period (1945–1991), identification with the Balkans remained largely unfavorable, except in the context of self-critical reflection (e.g., "It's just a Balkan thing"). The reluctance to identify with the Balkans stemmed from several factors. First, it was a rejection of the negative baggage associated with the region. Second, in an era of nation-building, associating with a broader regional identity viewed in a negative light was seen as counterproductive. Finally, people in the Balkans historically preferred to align themselves with European identities—be it Central European or Southeastern European—rather than with the Oriental connotations attached to the term "Balkan."

The 1990s saw a revival of the negative Balkanist narrative, making distancing from the label even more pronounced. Simultaneously, political transformations drove efforts by countries in and around the Balkans to formally distance themselves from the "Balkan" sphere by seeking membership in the European Union and NATO. Slovenia, frequently regarded as the most distinct from the traditional "Balkan" identity among the post-socialist Balkan states, was the first to join the EU in 2004, followed by Bulgaria in 2007. During this period, the term "Western Balkans" emerged as a political designation, encompassing the former Yugoslav states (excluding Slovenia) along with Albania. Croatia's accession to the European Union in 2013 further refined this classification, limiting the grouping to the WB6 - a politically defined region representing countries still progressing toward full European integration. This redefinition effectively narrows the concept of the Balkans to a political construct, centered on those nations yet to achieve EU membership. In terms of security and political stability, NATO membership has become the norm for most Balkan countries, with North Macedonia joining as the 30<sup>th</sup> member in 2020.

The 21st century has marked a phase of European and NATO integration for the Balkans, characterized by consolidation and efforts to rebrand the region. Tourism has played a role in this transformation. Each Balkan country has worked to construct a distinct identity as a tourist destination, emphasizing its diverse offerings, hospitality, and the allure of "undiscovered" treasures. This strategy leverages Balkan mysticism and cultural intrigue, blending "East meets West" narratives to attract international visitors. Majority of the countries in the Balkans, by distancing themselves from the broader "Balkan" identity and emphasizing their unique national characteristics, has contributed to improving the region's overall image. This shift allows tourists to choose specific destinations based on their individual appeal and, through firsthand experiences, discover that the Balkans as a whole—contrary to longstanding stereotypes—offer much more than their negative reputation suggests.

Data on international tourist arrivals reflect a steady growth in tourism activity across the region, with an increasing contribution to European and global tourism statistics. This evolution indicates a gradual but effective replacement of the old Balkan image—defined by insecurity and tribalism—with a more vibrant and diverse representation of its cultural and natural wealth. Collectively, this reshaped image positions the Balkans as a unique and attractive destination: *unseen, welcoming, and undiscovered*.

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