



Who Speaks for the Western Balkans? Cultural Representation and the Idea of Europe in Bosnia and Herzegovina

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14232/bless.2025.2.33-42>

Sarina Bakić

Selma Alispahić

ABSTRACT

Beginning with the genealogy of the Idea of Europe, understood as both a philosophical concept and the normative standard underpinning the European Union, this paper traces its mythical roots in ancient Greece, its philosophical elaborations, and its eventual institutional embodiment in the EU, with a primary focus on its connection to the cultural representation of the Western Balkans. Special attention is devoted to the question of center and periphery, situating the Balkans as a historically marginalized region within the European cultural imaginary. Through a case study centered on Bosnia and Herzegovina, while also incorporating examples from the wider Western Balkans, the paper analyzes cultural production as a site where European identity and associated ideological frameworks are negotiated, contested, and reimagined. The aim is not to reproduce formal discussions of EU conditionality, but to engage with the deeper layers of cultural practices and symbolic representations. By highlighting both dominant and alternative cultural trends, the paper assesses the attitude and relationship of the Balkans towards the EU and the Idea of Europe, while noting the selective and sometimes contradictory ways the EU invokes the Idea of Europe. The analysis seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how Balkan cultural representation reflects, challenges, and potentially enriches the European project. Finally, the study emphasizes the political significance of cultural representation, offering insights and recommendations for cultural policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the wider region, demonstrating how cultural identity can inform both domestic and regional strategies for engagement with European norms.

AUTHORS:

SARINA BAKIĆ

Faculty of Political Sciences,
University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and
Herzegovina

sarina.bakic@fpn.unsa.ba

[0000-0002-3031-4970](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3031-4970)

SELMA ALISPAHIĆ

Faculty of Political Sciences,
University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and
Herzegovina

selma.a27@hotmail.com

[0009-0003-2029-3162](https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2029-3162)

KEYWORDS:

The Idea of Europe, European Union, Western Balkans, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cultural Representation, European Values, European Identity

Introduction

Who speaks for the Western Balkans? This is the central question of this paper, which explores the intersection of cultural representation, politics, and European identity and values. The Western Balkans has long been viewed as situated at the margins of Europe, often depicted as its unfinished periphery or as its problematic “Other.” The aim of this paper is to examine the relationship between the Idea of Europe as a philosophical and normative project and the cultural representations of the Balkans, with a particular focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina. The analysis seeks to provide an understanding of how Balkan cultural representation reflects, challenges, and potentially enriches, the European project.

Cultural production in Bosnia and Herzegovina operates in a dual way: on one hand, it affirms values traditionally associated with Europe, such as human rights, humanism, and freedom, signaling alignment with the ideals of European identity. On the other hand, it frequently critiques the European Union and European institutions for failing to embody these principles consistently, exposing gaps between ideals and practice. In this sense, cultural expression from Bosnia and Herzegovina can demonstrate both adherence to the Idea of Europe and critical distance from Europe, thus revealing its authentic “European dimension” rooted in local experiences and culture. Post-war cultural and artistic developments provide vivid examples of this dynamic. Festivals such as *Sarajevska Zima*, the *MESS International Theater and Film Festival*, and the *Sarajevo Film Festival* have not only offered platforms for artistic creation but also articulated BiH’s European orientation and cosmopolitan ethos, even amid wartime siege. Similarly, music and contemporary performative art, such as the works of Dubioza Kolektiv or Smirna Kulenović, negotiate Europe’s values through irony and social commentary.

These dynamics are not limited to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Comparable cultural engagements can be found elsewhere in the Western Balkans, which also points to the tensions between local identity, European values and EU integration, showing how cultural production becomes a site where the Balkans can

negotiate its position within Europe. By examining both dominant and alternative cultural trends, this study emphasizes that Bosnia and Herzegovina (nor Balkans) is not a passive periphery awaiting European validation, but a space where European identity has been actively (re)defined. The region’s cultural output reveals a multiplicity of voices that both align with and critique the European project, demonstrating that the Balkans can contribute meaningfully to an ongoing, dynamic conversation about Europe, its values, and its future.

Method

The Idea of Europe, European history, and the European Union

This paper first defines the key concept, the Idea of Europe, and by doing so, it outlines the general theoretical and conceptual framework guiding the entire research. By explaining Europe as a cultural, philosophical, and normative construct, the paper establishes a lens through which the selected cases of cultural representation in Bosnia and Herzegovina are later examined, in the “Results & Discussion” part of the paper. The research is empirical in the sense that it draws on a wide range of materials, including books, official EU documents (such as declarations and treaties), art projects, as well as websites and internet sources. Content analysis is used as the primary methodological tool to evaluate how specific cultural practices, events, and institutions articulate or put into question European values and meanings. These cases are analysed in relation to the established conceptual framework in order to assess the ways in which Bosnia and Herzegovina positions itself within broader narratives of “Europe” and “the West.” In the next part, the findings are synthesised to formulate evaluative insights about the cultural representation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, answering simultaneously the central question of the paper: who speaks for the Western Balkans? Through this structure, the study demonstrates the connection between the Idea of Europe and the contemporary cultural representation of the Balkans, with a particular focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Europe is not merely a geographic description but a cultural and philosophical construction, an idea. It is both a place and an ideal.¹ From the myth of Europa,² which connects it

¹ Anthony Pagden. (2022). *The pursuit of Europe: A history*. Oxford University Press. 13-14.

² „The myth of Europa, a Phoenician princess, narrates her abduction from the shores of modern Syria and Lebanon by Olympian chief god Zeus. Struck by Europa’s beauty but

wishing to hide his feelings from his wife Hera, Zeus metamorphoses into a beautiful and tame white bull. He surprises Europa as she gathers flowers at a seaside meadow, and encourages her to get onto his back.

to ancient Greece where the philosophical foundations of reason and democracy were laid, “Europe” has over the years been imagined as the birthplace of rational thought and political order, as well as a particular form of identity and spirit. During the period of Enlightenment, the Idea of Europe was reshaped into a project of modernity and thinkers such as Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Kant associated Europe with progress, reason, and civilization.³ In the twentieth century, following the devastations of war, this philosophical concept was institutionalized in the European Union, which presented itself as the culmination of Europe’s rational and integrative project: “Although the concept of Europe and the identification with the European continent have existed for centuries – going back to ancient Greece – an institutional idea of Europe only emerged in the 1950s. Previous projects devoted to the maintenance of world peace and European integration include the League of Nations, founded in the aftermath of the First World War. But with the signing of the Treaty of Rome in 1957 (which would officially establish the EEC in January of the following year), what is today known as the EU appeared as the first federalist project capable of achieving concrete results. The year 1957 is thus a landmark in the history of the idea of Europe.”⁴

The idea of Europe embodies a set of core values such as democracy, human rights, reason, dialogue, and cultural openness, i.e. so called “European values”. These values are summarised in the Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union (2007),⁵ and even before, in the Declaration on European Identity (1973) adopted by the European Economic Community, the principles of “representative democracy, of the rule of law, of social justice - which is the ultimate goal of economic

progress - and of respect for human rights” are referred to as “the fundamental elements of the European Identity”.⁶

Furthermore, the notion of European values plays a significant role in the European Union’s accession process. In order to join the EU, candidate countries must fulfil the conditions established by the Copenhagen European Council in 1993 and further developed by the Madrid European Council in 1995, known as the Copenhagen criteria: stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities; a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competition and market forces in the EU; the ability to take on and implement effectively the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.⁷ In this way, the idea of Europe, a cultural and philosophical notion, has become a normative and legal framework guiding the EU’s identity and enlargement policy. However, when we speak of Europe, we think about more than European Union. The idea of Europe has political, but also religious, economic, philosophical, literary, and cultural meanings.⁸ It is an ideal with a long standing tradition, that is not objectified in any existing reality, but rather serves as a yardstick to measure and evaluate it.

The outlined content of the idea of Europe is not reflected in the history of Europe, which has been democratic, yet also totalitarian, nationalist, imperial, fascist, genocidal, and colonial; integrative, but also exclusionary (Christian and white) and divisive, with multiple constructions of internal and external “Others”; technologically advanced, yet marked by instrumental rationality and barbarism; economically prosperous, but also exploitative, neoliberal, and unequal.⁹ Although often regarded as a “very good idea”, the idea of Europe has also been criticised as Eurocentric, Euro-supremacist and Euroniversalizing „in

Zeus takes Europa away as her attendants are distracted and swim across the Mediterranean Sea, taking her to Crete. It is only when they reach the western island that Zeus reveals his identity. He seduces Europa, who becomes the mother of Minos, the future king of Crete.” Mariana Liz. (2016). *Euro-Visions: Europe in Contemporary Cinema*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic. 14.

³ Catriona Seth and Rotraud von Kulesa. (2017). *The idea of Europe: Enlightenment perspectives*. Open Book Publishers.

⁴ Mariana Liz. (2016). *Euro-Visions: Europe in Contemporary Cinema*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic. 10.

⁵ „The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.” European Union. (2012). Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European

Union. *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 326/3. Retrieved from https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF (accessed 5 September 2025)

⁶ European Union. (1973). *Declaration on European Identity* (12). Retrieved from Luxembourg: Office for official publications of the European Communities. website: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/declaration_on_european_identity_copenhagen_14_december_1973-en-02798dc9-9c69-4b7d-b2c9-f03a8db7da32.html (accessed 12 September 2025)

⁷ European Commission. (2012, June 6). Conditions for Memberships. Retrieved from https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/conditions-membership_en accessed 12 September 2025)

⁸ Shane Weller. (2021). *The Idea of Europe: A Critical History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2.

⁹ Ibid.

nature".¹⁰ These problematic aspects reveal that Europe has not always lived up to its own ideals. Still, it is precisely through confronting this past that the idea of Europe can retain its meaning today, not as a symbol of superiority, but as a project of self-criticism, renewal, and commitment to universal human dignity. One approach that could preserve the idea of Europe and its humanizing potential is the acknowledgment of Europe's dark past, and the recognition that „if there is a European way, it is certainly not the only way, and that what is best in the European is often what it cannot really claim as entirely its own.“¹¹

Results

The Idea of Europe and the cultural representation of the Western Balkans: The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina

“The Balkan culture is primitively traditionalist, which means that it is neither rationalist nor technicist and that, therefore, its future does not necessarily have to be European. Rationalism (which has killed God and the ‘soul’ of Western man) and technicism, which has ‘materialized’ it (at the very moment when, in his utmost folly and spiritual confusion, he believed he could humanize nature), have never existed in the Balkans and never will. Anti-Europeanism here is unambiguous; its two basic points of reference are: 1) the Balkans is not Europe, and 2) the Balkans, therefore, is free from Europe's maladies - above all, from the disease of rationalism, which will bring Europe to its death.”¹² These are the words of Radomir Konstantinović, a Serbian writer and philosopher who, in the 1970s, reflected on the spirit and cultural condition of the Balkans. This perception of the Balkans, as a space fundamentally distinct from Europe, is deeply ingrained both within and outside the region.

From within, the Balkan self-image is often marked by anti-European sentiment: the European Union and “Europe” are perceived as a foreign and corrupting Western force, a conspiracy seeking to impose new cultural norms such as LGBT rights and gender equality, viewed as forms of moral decay and threats to “traditional values”. Simultaneously, while Europe

defined itself through values of universality, it often drew boundaries that left certain regions or peoples outside. Therefore, from the outside, within Europe itself, the Balkans have long been imagined as Europe's internal Other, its “powder keg”, as a backward, violent or unfinished part of the continent. As Maria Todorova has shown in *Imagining the Balkans* (1997), building on Edward Said's notion of Orientalism which demonstrated how Europe constructed its identity by differentiating itself against the “East”,¹³ the Balkans have been discursively constructed as Europe's shadow, its “Other within”, simultaneously part of Europe and yet perpetually excluded from its idea of modernity and civilization. This process, which she termed “Balkanism,” illustrates how the region has been discursively marginalized, framed as not entirely outside of Europe but not fully inside either.¹⁴

This in-between position continues to shape perceptions today. The Western Balkans is often described in political discourse as unstable, conflict-prone, or corrupt. The narratives of perpetual transition and incompleteness reinforce the image of the region as a problem to be solved, rather than as an equal participant in the European project. Such discursive positioning has real political consequences: it affects how EU institutions engage with the region, what cultural productions are recognized or supported, and how people in the Balkans perceive their own place in Europe.

Historically, Bosnia and Herzegovina has been marked by pluralism and diversity: it was a frontier of empires, a meeting point of religions and cultures, and, in the 1990s, a battlefield that forced Europe to confront its own contradictions. In this sense, Bosnia became both a symbol of European failure and an object of European intervention. Cultural production and representation from Bosnia and Herzegovina has often reflected and engaged with these dynamics. Cultural representation refers to the processes and practices through which meaning is produced and circulated within culture, i.e. the ways in which individuals and groups present themselves and are represented by others through language, images, symbols, and narratives. As Stuart Hall (1997) argues, representation is not a mere reflection of reality but a constitutive practice, a process through which meaning itself is created.¹⁵ Through representational systems such as language, media, and art, culture becomes the space where identities

¹⁰ Ibid. 5.

¹¹ Ibid. 15.

¹² Radomir Konstantinović. (2004). *Filosofija palanke*. Beograd, Serbia: Otkrovenje.

¹³ Edward Said. (1977). *Orientalism*. London, United Kingdom: Penguin.

¹⁴ Maria Todorova. (2009). *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford University Press.

¹⁵ Stuart Hall. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. The Open University. 61.

are articulated and transformed.

Films, international film festivals, literature, music, and visual arts in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina have often evoked themes of war, trauma, suffering, identity, belonging, and memory. Often described as the “Jerusalem of Europe” for its long history of religious coexistence, Sarajevo has repeatedly positioned itself as a meeting point of cultures within the European imagination. This symbolic role gained particular prominence during the 1990s, when Sarajevo, under siege, became the focal point of one of the most remarkable cultural solidarity initiatives in contemporary European history. In 1993, between Antwerp and Lisbon’s terms as European Cultural Capitals, the director of the Sarajevo Winter Festival, Ibrahim Spahić, together with Bernard Favre d’Arcier, director of the Avignon Festival, and a network of European artists, launched the initiative to proclaim Sarajevo the “Cultural Capital of Europe” for the winter of 1993/1994, as a symbolic affirmation that Sarajevo embodies Europe’s values of openness, pluralism, and tolerance even in the midst of war.¹⁶ Although the Ministers of Culture of the twelve EU member states rejected the proposal, the campaign continued in defiance of the decision, mobilising thousands of artists, intellectuals, and institutions across the continent, and many international artists travelled to the besieged city as a “de facto Cultural Capital of Europe” to take part in the Sarajevo Winter Festival.



“Sarajevo Cultural Capital of Europe”, poster of the Sarajevo Winter Festival 1993/4.¹⁷

The Sarajevo Winter Festival itself had, since its founding in 1984, served as a platform dedicated to artistic freedom, intercultural exchange, and global dialogue. Remarkably, it continued without interruption throughout the war, becoming a symbol of creative and cultural resistance and a living affirmation of the city’s cosmopolitan identity.¹⁸ In a similar spirit of cultural resistance, International Theater and Film Festival MESS Sarajevo played a key role in keeping cultural life alive during the war. In 1993, MESS organised the first film festival in the besieged city “After the End of the World”, which is a precursor to today’s Sarajevo Film Festival. Throughout the war, MESS produced groundbreaking theatrical works, including those by local artists as well as by international figures such as Susan Sontag and Peter Schumann.¹⁹ Sarajevo Film Festival (SFF) was founded in 1995 with the aim of helping rebuild civil society and preserve the city’s cosmopolitan spirit. Today, the SFF stands as the leading film festival in Southeast Europe, and proclaims its commitment to European values of human rights, dialogue, and the politics of memory, particularly through its internationally recognised “Dealing with the Past” programme. With a regional focus spanning the broader Southeast European space, the festival has become the main platform for filmmakers and emerging talents, bringing regional cinema into the centre of European and global attention.²⁰ Another film festival that should be mentioned is Pravo Ljudski, whose very name signals its focus on human rights. This annual festival showcases creative documentary and experimental cinema, and, held each year during the second week of November, it presents a diverse program of roughly 80 films and audio-visual works, bringing cinema beyond traditional venues into theatres, libraries, galleries, small towns, rural areas, mountains, and parks across Sarajevo and throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina.²¹

It can be argued that cultural production in Bosnia and Herzegovina has long nurtured the values that constitute the Idea of Europe, particularly during the 1980s, which are often regarded as a golden age of Bosnian culture. Today, many cultural projects seek recognition through European platforms, aligning themselves with discourses of democracy, human rights, and modernity. One prominent example of EU-oriented cultural infrastructure in Bosnia

¹⁶ Sarajevo cultural capital of Europe – WAKE up, Europe! (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://wakeupeurope.ba/shop/sarajevo-cultural-capital-of-europe/?lang=en> (assessed on 15 September 2025)

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Sarajevska zima. (n.d.). O festivalu. Retrieved from <https://sarajewowinterfest.ba/o-festivalu/> (assessed on 15 September 2025)

¹⁹ MESS festival 2025. (n.d.). Retrieved from

<https://mess.ba/en/mess-festival-2025/> (accessed 12 October 2025)

²⁰ Sarajevo Film Festival. (n.d.). O Festivalu. Retrieved from <https://www.sff.ba/stranica/o-festivalu> (accessed 12 October 2025)

²¹ Pravo Ljudski. (2020, November 3). Introduction. Retrieved from <https://pravoljudski.org/introduction/> (accessed 14 October 2025)

and Herzegovina is Europe House, a long-term communication initiative established by the EU Delegation. Its key purpose is to introduce the public to EU policies, institutions, programs, and projects, as well as to communicate the nature of EU–Bosnia and Herzegovina relations. Europe House organizes a broad range of public activities, informational sessions, thematic events, as well as cultural and artistic programs such as exhibitions, performances, screenings, and workshops, all “with the goal of promoting European values in BiH.”²² It could be claimed that the way in which the EU engages with Balkan culture is selective: certain narratives, especially those centered on post-conflict reconciliation or Europeanization, are promoted and funded, while others, such as those that question neoliberal reforms, receive less attention. This selectivity shows that cultural policy is not neutral but deeply political. By shaping which voices are amplified, the EU indirectly defines what it means to be “European” in the Balkans.

Mainstream culture in Bosnia and Herzegovina likewise plays a significant role in articulating how the Western Balkans interprets its relationship with Europe and its heritage. One of the most popular examples is the musical band Dubioza Kolektiv, whose work uses satire to expose the contradictions of Balkan identity and European integration. Their 2011 track “Euro Song” explicitly addresses the asymmetries of power and recognition that shape the relationship between the EU and the Balkans. Through humorous lines such as “Auf wiedersehen miss Merkel/ You are not my friend/ When I tell you ‘merhaba’/ You don’t understand”, the band comments on linguistic, cultural, and political barriers that position the Balkans as “other” within Europe, and they express frustration with symbolic inclusion without substantive equality, summed up in the verse “I’m sick of being European just on Eurosong.” The song also denounces Europe’s rise in exclusionary politics: “All around the Europe, right wing taking power/ They want to kick me out, so I live undercover”, and questions the legitimacy of European institutions, referring to the European Parliament as “just another hustle.”²³ Similarly, in their 2013 song “Volio BiH”, Dubioza Kolektiv further expands this critique and with lyrics such as “I wish Putin and Obama would support us/ I don’t want to go to Europe, let Europe come to us”,

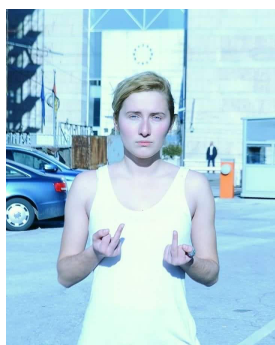
the band refers to the fact that Bosnia must constantly orient itself toward external powers, whether global superpowers or the European Union. The line “Here comes Europe/ now the world’s militias will beat us” exaggerates fears of foreign interference and points to how Europeanization is often experienced as something imposed from the outside.²⁴ Cultural representations like these demonstrate that contemporary cultural production in Bosnia and Herzegovina does not merely celebrate European values, nor does it simply reject them. Instead, it uses satire, irony, and political critique to question who defines Europe, who belongs to it, and on what terms. Through this type of artistic expression, Bosnia and Herzegovina emerges not as a passive periphery but as an active interlocutor in shaping the meaning of Europe.

Beyond mainstream cultural production, there exists an independent scene in Bosnia and Herzegovina that engages with Europe and its values in alternative ways. Artists and activists create works that critique both local political dysfunction and European bureaucracy, hypocrisy, and paternalism. Through humor, irony, and experimentation, these cultural practices articulate a vision of Bosnia and Herzegovina that resists reduction to stereotypes. They demonstrate that Bosnia is not merely a passive recipient of European norms but an active producer of cultural and political meaning. One prominent example of this independent cultural sphere is the work of artist Smirna Kulenović, whose project *Bosnian Girl 2* challenges both national and European narratives about victimhood, justice, and belonging. The work was created on the day in 2017 when Ratko Mladić, responsible for the siege of Sarajevo and the Srebrenica genocide, was sentenced to life imprisonment. Watching the verdict, Kulenović recalls feeling a mix of relief and anger at the partial acknowledgment of atrocities, which led her to raise her middle fingers in front of the EU building in Sarajevo, which was captured by a friend. The title references artist Šejla Kamerić’s 2003 work *Bosnian Girl*, a portrait confronting victimization and stereotypes faced by Bosnian women during the war.

²² Europe House. (2025, March 25). O Nama. Retrieved from <https://europehouse.ba/bs/o-nama/> (accessed 24 October 2025)

²³ Genius. (n.d.). Dubioza Kolektiv – Euro song. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Dubioza-kolektiv-euro-song-lyrics> (accessed 24 October 2025)

²⁴ Genius. (n.d.). Dubioza Kolektiv – Volio BiH. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Dubioza-kolektiv-volio-bih-lyrics> (accessed 24 October 2025)



“Bosnian Girl 2”(2017)

As Kulenović explains: “When my friend sent me this photo, it immediately reminded me of the portrait of Šejla Kamerić because of the white shirt. And for me this is *Bosnian Girl 2* because it’s also playing with the idea of the victim. I don’t want to be this victim anymore and I think the new generation of Bosnians, not only women but everyone, are a bit angrier and in resistance towards the system, our own past and our own stupidity. Also, towards the fake ideal of Europe we are constantly bombarded with because of our goal to enter the EU. In workshops and seminars we can only hear that the young generation needs to believe in European values, humanism and so on, but when I read about what’s going on in the member states, where right wing parties are taking over, it seems to be a completely fake ideal and I don’t believe in it. In this work I’m not only showing middle to the EU but it goes first of all to the whole Balkans. This is why I decided to project the photo on the façade of every contemporary art museum in the Balkans and communicate it in the public space. Only after the Balkans I started exhibiting it elsewhere.”²⁵

Another example of alternative cultural engagement with Europe is the digital platform “Wake up Europe!”, developed by the History Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the 30th anniversary of the siege of Sarajevo. Through one hundred documented stories, the platform reconstructs the diverse and often overlooked forms of grassroots solidarity that emerged across Europe during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. While many Western governments

adopted a passive or neutral stance, ordinary citizens, artists, journalists, activists, and local communities mobilised in ways that frequently challenged their own political establishments: “It was a very heterogeneous mobilisation, a mix of humanitarian and civic engagement, often in response to and in close interaction with those in Sarajevo and Bosnia and Herzegovina who were involved in the civic, cultural and intellectual defence of the Bosnian way of life and of their country, and who were calling on the outside world to abandon its passivity, summarized in the slogan ‘Wake up Europe!’.”²⁶ By foregrounding a Europe “from below,” through civic responsibility rather than institutional authority, the platform reimagines European values as lived practices rather than abstract ideals. Together, these examples show how independent cultural actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina articulate complex, often critical visions of Europe, visions that expand the conceptual space of European identity and challenge the assumption that Europe is a coherent or benevolent project, rather than simply aspiring to join it.

Similar tendencies appear across the wider region, where artists and cultural initiatives engage directly with the symbolic and political dimensions of European integration. These practices also demonstrate that the relationship between the Balkans and the European project is neither passive nor one-directional, but rather dialectical. An explicit critical engagement with Europe can be seen in Tanja Ostojić’s, an artist from Serbia, long-term art project *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport*. Beginning with a public call for marriage proposals in 2000, the project unfolded through the exchange of hundreds of emails and letters, a legally recognized marriage and subsequent divorce, and finally an archival installation. By moving from online communication to live performance and ultimately to the domain of law, Ostojić exposed the vulnerability experienced by non-EU women whose private lives become objects of bureaucratic scrutiny by the EU.²⁷ Another cultural intervention we can mention is Rambo Amadeus’s “Euro Neuro”, a satirical musical performance at 2012 Eurovision that explored the contradictions of Balkan–EU relations. The song lyrics listed the expected qualities of a modern, “europeanised” Balkan subject: “don’t be sceptic, hermetic, pathetic, alphabetic... don’t be dogmatic, bureaucratic, you need to become pragmatic”,²⁸ and mocked not only clichés attributed to the

²⁵ Kulenović, S. (2018). It was not the normal way of having a childhood. Interview by R. Deim. *Art Portal*. Retrieved from https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/49596957/It_was_not_the_normal_way_of_having_a_childhood_Interview_with_Smirna_Kulenovi_II_artportal.hu.pdf (accessed 23 October 2025)

²⁶ Wake up Europe. (n.d.). About project – WAKE up, Europe!. Retrieved from [https://wakeupeurope.ba/about-](https://wakeupeurope.ba/about-project/?lang=en)

[project/?lang=en](https://wakeupeurope.ba/about-project/?lang=en) (assessed on 6 November 2025)

²⁷ Ostojić, T. (2024, August 6). Looking for a husband with EU passport (2000–2005). Retrieved from <https://tanjaostojic.com/looking-for-a-husband-with-eu-passport-2000-2005/> (assessed on 5 November 2025)

²⁸ Genius. (n.d.). Rambo Amadeus – Euro Neuro. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Rambo-amadeus-euro-neuro-lyrics>

Balkans but also the reductive ways in which Europe imagines the region.²⁹

Conclusion

Is the cultural representation of Bosnia and Herzegovina aligned with the idea of Europe, and should it even aspire to be? Considering Europe's own historical contradictions, its colonial past, and its internal exclusions, the moral hierarchy implicit in the judgment of the Balkans as "primitive" or "not yet European enough" appears deeply hypocritical. As Maria Todorova and Edward Said have shown, Europe has long sustained its self-image through the construction of an internal and external "Other", a necessary contrast against which its own modernity, rationality, and civility are defined.

What is referred to as European values thus represents not a universal or timeless moral code, but a historically contingent and discursively produced set of norms, one possible constellation among many, neither inherently superior nor absolutely authentic. The question of whether the cultural representation of Bosnia and Herzegovina embodies these values should therefore not be posed in terms of progress, development, or adequacy, but rather as a question of ideological and axiological consonance: to what extent do the narratives emerging from Bosnia and Herzegovina resonate with, diverge from, or resist the hegemonic self-representation of Europe?

We can determine that the Balkans is not merely a passive periphery but an active space where European identity is negotiated. Cultural representation from Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrates that the region can reflect, challenge, and enrich the European project. Second, culture is not only an expression of identity but also a political resource. By articulating alternative narratives, cultural actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina can reshape the terms of engagement with the EU and reject the image of the Balkans as incomplete or deficient. Finally, supporting diverse cultural voices in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not only a matter of artistic freedom but also of democratic development. Encouraging local initiatives and recognising cultural expressions beyond stereotypical frames can strengthen both regional identity and European integration.

Moreover, cultural representation in Bosnia and Herzegovina exposes the limits of a normative

European framework that often prioritises coherence over plurality. Rather than aspiring to fit within a predefined European cultural script, Bosnian and Herzegovinian cultural production reveals Europe's reliance on its margins for self-reflection and renewal. By foregrounding experiences of fragmentation, post-conflict memory, and hybrid belonging, these representations unsettle linear narratives of progress and challenge the assumption that European identity is anchored in homogeneity. In this sense, Bosnia and Herzegovina does not stand outside Europe but operates as a critical site through which Europe's unresolved tensions, such as between universalism and exclusion, memory and denial, centre and periphery, are made visible.

Ultimately, the relevance of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the idea of Europe lies not in its capacity to mirror dominant values, but in its ability to question them. Cultural representation becomes a form of epistemic intervention, insisting that Europe must be understood as a space of negotiation rather than consensus. If Europe is to remain a meaningful political and cultural project, it must recognise voices that do not simply affirm its self-image but complicate it. From this perspective, Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a cultural "problem" to be resolved, but a constitutive interlocutor in imagining a more reflexive, plural, and ethically grounded Europe.

In the end, the question "Who speaks for the Western Balkans?" has no single answer. It is a field where different actors, institutions, intellectuals, artists, and activists claim authority. Yet, precisely in this multiplicity lies the potential of the Balkans to contribute to the development of the Idea of Europe, reminding us that Europe is not a finished story but an ongoing dialogue.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

REFERENCES

- Europe House. (2025, March 25). O Nama. Retrieved from <https://europehouse.ba/bs/o-nama/> (accessed 24 October 2025)
- European Commission. (2012, June 6). Conditions for Memberships. Retrieved from https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/conditions-membership_en (accessed 12 September 2025)

(accessed 24 October 2025)

²⁹ Stilin, B. (2012, May 18). Rambo Amadeus, the cliché slayer.

Retrieved from <https://voxeurop.eu/en/rambo-amadeus-the-cliche-slayer/> (assessed on 28 October 2025)

- European Union. (1973). *Declaration on European Identity* (12). Retrieved from Luxembourg: Office for official publications of the European Communities. website: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/declaration_on_european_identity_copenhagen_14_december_1973-en-02798dc9-9c69-4b7d-b2c9-f03a8db7da32.html (accessed 12 September 2025)
- European Union. (2012). Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union. *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 326/3. Retrieved from https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF (accessed 5 September 2025)
- Genius. (n.d.). Dubioza Kolektiv – Euro song. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Dubioza-kolektiv-euro-song-lyrics> (accessed 24 October 2025)
- Genius. (n.d.). Dubioza Kolektiv – Volio BiH. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Dubioza-kolektiv-volio-bih-lyrics> (accessed 24 October 2025)
- Genius. (n.d.). Rambo Amadeus – Euro Neuro. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Rambo-amadeus-euro-neuro-lyrics> (accessed 24 October 2025)
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. The Open University.
- Konstantinović, R. (2004). *Filosofija palanke*. Beograd, Serbia: Otkrovenje.
- Kulenović, S. (2018). It was not the normal way of having a childhood. Interview by R. Deim. *Art Portal*. Retrieved from https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/49596957/It_was_not_the_normal_way_of_having_a_childhood_Interview_with_Smirna_Kulenovi_II_a_rtportal.hu.pdf (accessed 23 October 2025)
- Liz, M. (2016). *Euro-Visions: Europe in Contemporary Cinema*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- MESS festival 2025. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://mess.ba/en/mess-festival-2025/> (accessed 12 October 2025)
- Ostojić, T. (2024, August 6). Looking for a husband with EU passport (2000–2005). Retrieved from <https://tanjaostojic.com/looking-for-a-husband-with-eu-passport-2000-2005/> (accessed on 5 November 2025)
- Pagden, A. (2022). *The pursuit of Europe: A history*. Oxford University Press.
- Pravo Ljudski. (2020, November 3). Introduction. Retrieved from <https://pravoljudski.org/introduction/> (accessed 14 October 2025)
- Said, E. (1977). *Orientalism*. London, United Kingdom: Penguin.
- Sarajevo cultural capital of Europe – WAKE up, Europe! (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://wakeupeurope.ba/shop/sarajevo-cultural-capital-of-europe/?lang=en> (accessed on 15 September 2025)
- Sarajevo Film Festival. (n.d.). O Festivalu. Retrieved from <https://www.sff.ba/stranica/o-festivalu> (accessed 12 October 2025)
- Sarajevska zima. (n.d.). O festivalu. Retrieved from <https://sarajevowinterfest.ba/o-festivalu/> (accessed on 15 September 2025)
- Seth, C., & Kulesa, R. V. (2017). *The idea of Europe: Enlightenment perspectives*. Open Book Publishers.
- Stilin, B. (2012, May 18). Rambo Amadeus, the cliché slayer. Retrieved from <https://voxeurope.eu/en/rambo-amadeus-the-cliche-slayer/> (accessed on 28 October 2025)
- Todorova, M. (2009). *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford University Press.
- Wake up Europe. (n.d.). About project – WAKE up, Europe!. Retrieved from <https://wakeupeurope.ba/about-project/?lang=en> (accessed on 6 November 2025)
- Weller, S. (2021). *The Idea of Europe: A Critical History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Submitted: 31 January 2025 Accepted: 5 January 2026 Published: 6 January 2026

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Bakić, S., Alispahić, A. 2025. Who Speaks for the Western Balkans? Cultural Representation and the Idea of Europe in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Balkans Legal, Economic and Social Studies* 2(2):33–42. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14232/bless.2025.2.33-42>

COPYRIGHT:

© 2025 The Author(s). This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

BLESS – Balkans Legal, Economic and Social Studies is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Western Balkans Centre.

The research and the e-journal were supported by the Humanities and Social Sciences Cluster of the Centre of Excellence for Interdisciplinary Research, Development and Innovation of the University of Szeged. The authors are members of the Western Balkans Center.