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**BORDER ISSUES IN EASTERN
EUROPE**

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BORDER ISSUES IN EASTERN EUROPE

Abstract:

In Central and Eastern Europe the movement of borders has been so frequent during the last two centuries that no country can flatly affirm where its limits start and end. This opens the door to all kind of revisionist interpretations, many times based more on myths and legends rather than on real facts. At the end of the Cold War in 1989, the consequent political openness created new and very seldom peaceful divisions (fifteen states from the USSR, seven from Yugoslavia), and the resurgence of old territorial conflicts, which two decades later are far from being solved.

Keywords:

Europe, east, borders, ethnics.

1. INTRODUCTION

*De aquellos polvos vienen estos lodos*¹

When we study a map from Europe during the French Revolution (1789), we can appreciate how the limits of the big Western Nation-states (the United Kingdom, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Switzerland, or even France) were already set, with a few exceptions, in the current borders. The center of the continent was overshadowed by the Holy Roman Empire (a conglomerate of innumerable entities having no political cohesion), in which Prussia and Austria struggled to take control, and by Italy, which was divided as well (the Kingdom of Piedmont, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, the Papal States...). Lastly, and in the East, there were only three big States: the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Tsarist Russia and the Ottoman Empire.

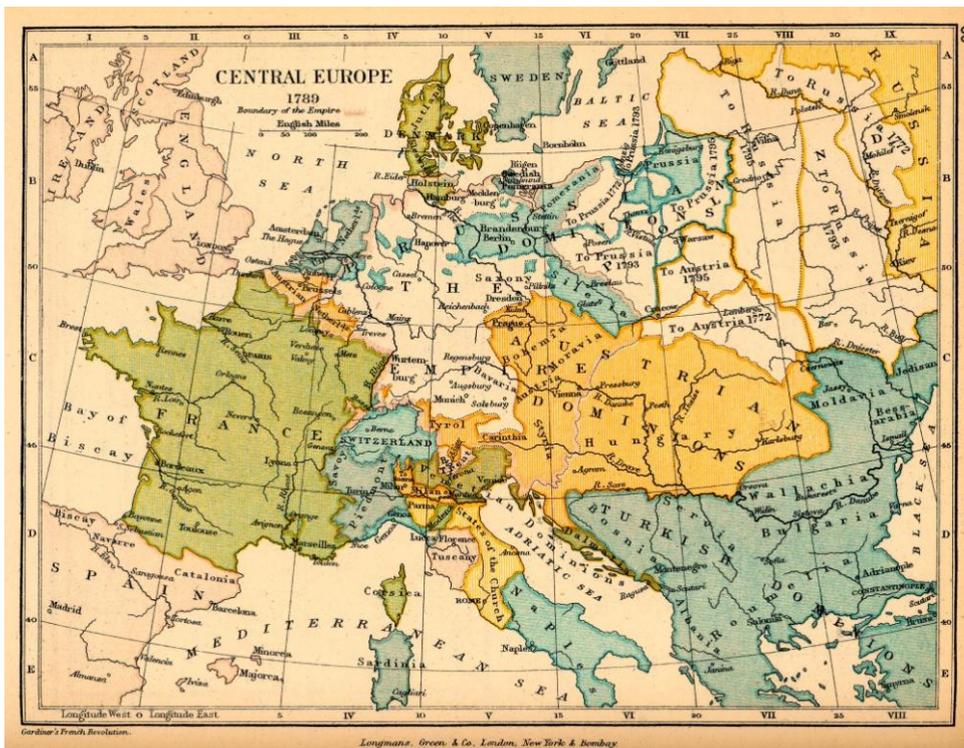


Figure 1: Europe in 1789. The three partitions (1772-1793-1795) that erased the Polish-Lithuanian union from the map are represented above.

After the "Bonaparte cyclone", the 1815 Congress of Vienna gave Europe back its status quo previous to the Revolution, and the victorious powers redefined, with minor adjustments, the borders: Austria renounced to Belgium in return of Lombardy-Veneto and the Illyrian

¹ Popular Spanish proverb meaning that almost every disaster happens due to slips, mistakes, previous disarray or even facts that have apparently little importance.

Provinces (in current Croatia); Prussia obtained Posen and Danzig at the expense of the short-lived Duchy of Warsaw; and Russia started to control Finland, Bessarabia (current Moldavia), and the remains of Poland. The Holy Empire became the German Confederation, and its political cohesion was not modified neither was the fight between Austria and Prussia for its leadership.

The Europe born after the Congress of Vienna was dogged by the 1848 revolutionary movements. In the following decade, leaders like Otto von Bismarck in Prussia or the Count of Cavour in the Piedmont laid the foundations of the German and Italian unification respectively. In the first case, this was done after defeating Austria in the Battle of Sadowa in 1866 and France in the 1871 war, and in the second case after conquering the Veneto, which belonged to Austria, in 1866 and the Papal States in 1870. Therefore, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the map of Europe showed a reduced number of States, although in the Balkans, and due to the decline of the Ottoman Empire, new countries were starting to emerge (like Serbia, Montenegro, Romania or Bulgaria).

The absurd origin of World War I — which caused ten million deaths— was followed by the design of the Eastern Europe borders, based on the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, from which Austria (without South Tyrol, transferred to Italy), and Hungary (that transferred Galicia to Poland, the Vojvodina to Yugoslavia, Transylvania to Romania, and other provinces to Czechoslovakia) were born. It was also based on the extinction of the Ottoman Empire (and the distribution of its territory in the Balkans between Yugoslavia, Greece and Albania), and the retirement of Russia after the Soviet Revolution, with the resurgence of Poland as an independent State (that, in addition, regained Posen and the Danzig Corridor at the expense of Germany), the independence of Finland and the Baltic States, and the reincorporation of Bessarabia to Romania.

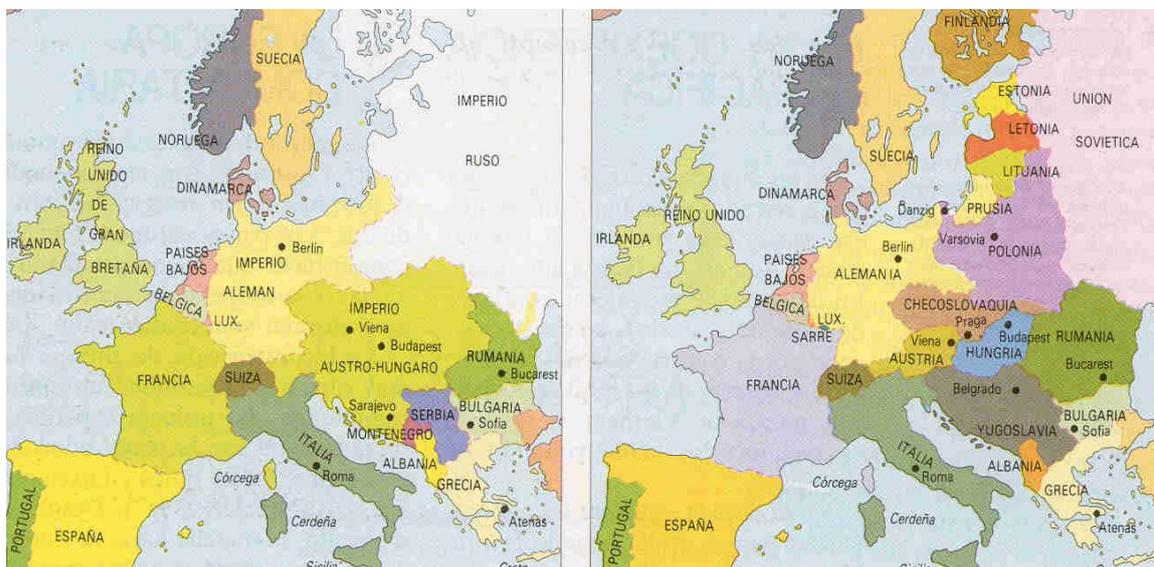


Figure 2: Europe before and after the Great War. Poland has resurrected with strength, the Austro-Hungarian Empire has been divided, and the new Turkey is almost completely excluded from the continent.

The last huge movement of borders in the East occurred after World War II, as a consequence of the Soviet occupation as Nazi Germany stepped back to Berlin. Thus, Poland kept Pomerania, Silesia and the south of East Prussia at the expense of Germany, giving up its eastern third territory from the period between the two World Wars to the USSR. The USSR regained the Baltic States, a part of Finland, the north of East Prussia, the Subcarpathian Rus at the expense of Czechoslovakia, and Moldavia at the expense of Romania. And if that was not enough, the Soviets were addicted to changing interior borders from the USSR, which they did up to 94 times.

The summary is that in Central and Eastern Europe the movement of borders has been so frequent during the last two centuries that no country can flatly affirm where its limits start and end. This opens the door to all kind of revisionist interpretations, many times based more on myths and legends rather than on real facts. At the end of the Cold War in 1989, the consequent political openness created new and very seldom peaceful divisions (fifteen states from the USSR, seven from Yugoslavia), and the resurgence of old territorial conflicts, which two decades later are far from being solved.

2. GERMANY-POLAND

The current border between the Federal Republic of Germany and Poland follows the line of the Oder and Neisse rivers, established by the Potsdam Conference in July 1945 after World War II, which means that current Germany does not include two thirds of the Kingdom of Prussia's territory, soul and impulse of the reunification of Germany in the nineteenth century. This lost territory includes the regions of Pomerania (Pommern/Pomorze with capital in Sttetin/Szczecin, in German and Polish respectively), Silesia (Schlesien/Slask with capital in Breslau/Wroclaw) and the south of East Prussia.

The territory's cession was followed by the agreement between the Allies for the forced deportation (in Potsdam it was euphemistically called "resettlement in a orderly and human manner") of the German population (who could not escape from the Soviet advance) from these regions (the *Volksdeutsche*) in order to establish an ethnically homogeneous Polish State (currently 98.7% of its inhabitants are ethnic Poles) and to avoid later demands of reunification with Germany. Across Eastern Europe, between 12 and 14 million Germans were expelled from their homes, and between half a million and a million of them died.

In March 1990, after the fall of the Berlin Wall (9 November 1989), the negotiations for the FRG and GDR union started. However, Poland was alarmed because of the possibility that the reunified State would claim Pomerania and Silesia. The old victorious powers from the World War required Germany to explicitly renounce to this claim, something that happened with the *Bundestag* resolution on 21 June 1990, and the Poland-Germany Border Treaty on 14 November of the same year. The fact that there were no ethnic Germans, whose rights must be defended, in Poland made this process easier.

However, the wounds have not yet healed. For example, in 2006, the organization of an exhibition in Berlin titled "Forced Paths", which was meant to show the suffering of displaced Germans during the twentieth century, caused an angry response from the Polish authorities. They criticized that this people's case was not located in the historical background where it happened, and that the responsibility of the previous Nazi Germany was not considered. The prime minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski called it a *"very bad, worrying and sad event"* and the acting mayor of Warsaw cancelled its planned trip to Berlin while the exhibition was running.



Figure 3: German territories transferred to Poland (in the West), and Poland ones transferred to the USSR (in the East). Observe the last movement of the "Curzon Line" to include Lvov in the USSR.

3. POLAND-UKRAINE/BELARUS/LITHUANIA

The German territory received by Poland in the West was counteracted by the Polish forced transfer of the *Kresy* ("Borderlands" in Polish) to the USSR after World War II. A territory of 135.000 Km² that, in the time between the two World Wars, had a population of 5 million Ukrainians, 3.5 million Poles, 1.5 million Belarusians and 1.3 million Jews. The border

between the Soviet Union and Poland established by the "Peace of Riga" after World War I was about 200 km from the East of the "Curzon Line", a reference for the new border after World War II.

As Prussia was the original nucleus of current Germany, the Lublin-Krakow-Lvov triangle, called "Little Poland", can be considered as the historical heart of the Polish nation. And that is why, when the USA and the United Kingdom approved the Russian's request to divert the "Curzon Line" in order to include Lvov and its province within the USSR, Poland showed the highest resistance, until finally around 750,000 Poles were deported from Ukraine to Poland. However, in Belarus and Lithuania the Soviet authorities tried to hold back the Polish people, in order to avoid in particular the depopulation of the countryside. In spite of this measure, 250,000 people came back to Poland after the War, mostly from Vilnius and its province, as Lithuanians considered it their historical capital and they forced the Polish people expulsion.

As in Western Poland there were no Germans left, in the States born from the old USSR there are practically no Poles left. In Ukraine, where, as it was already mentioned, the pressure to expel them was higher, they only represent 0.3% of the total population (135,000). However, in Belarus they account for 4% (400,000 people), and in Lithuania 6.7% (230,000). To give you an example, in this last country around 20,000 children each year choose to be educated in Polish, a right that is also guaranteed to the Russian and Belarusian minorities.

In spite of that, it has been stated that the Lvov and Ivano-Frankovsk provinces (the Polish Stanislawow) are the most westernized areas of current Ukraine and that they have no connection with the ethnically Russian eastern provinces on which the ruling "Party of Regions" is based. Thus, during the presidential elections of 2010, Yulia Tymoshenko obtained up to 95% of the votes in this region, while the winner Viktor Yanukovich reached similar numbers in the lower Don. The bond of the nationalist Ukraine with Poland still exists, as the joint organization of the next European Football Championship shows.

4. RUSSIA-UKRAINE/BELARUS

The map of figure 4 can also be used to illustrate this section. The orange areas, which supported Tymoshenko, are:

- The center, around the capital Kiev, which coincides with the Kiev and Pereyaslav of Rus Principalities from the ninth and thirteenth centuries, is characterized by an

ethnically and linguistically Ukrainian population, and an Orthodox-Catholic religion under the Kiev patriarchate.

- The west around Lvov and Ivano-Frankivsk, that in times of the Rus formed the Principality of Galicia (Galicia), had later a strong Austro-Hungarian influence and formed in 1918 the "West Ukrainian People's Republic", annexed by Poland. Its population is ethnically and linguistically Ukrainian, but they practice the eastern catholic religion or Uniate.

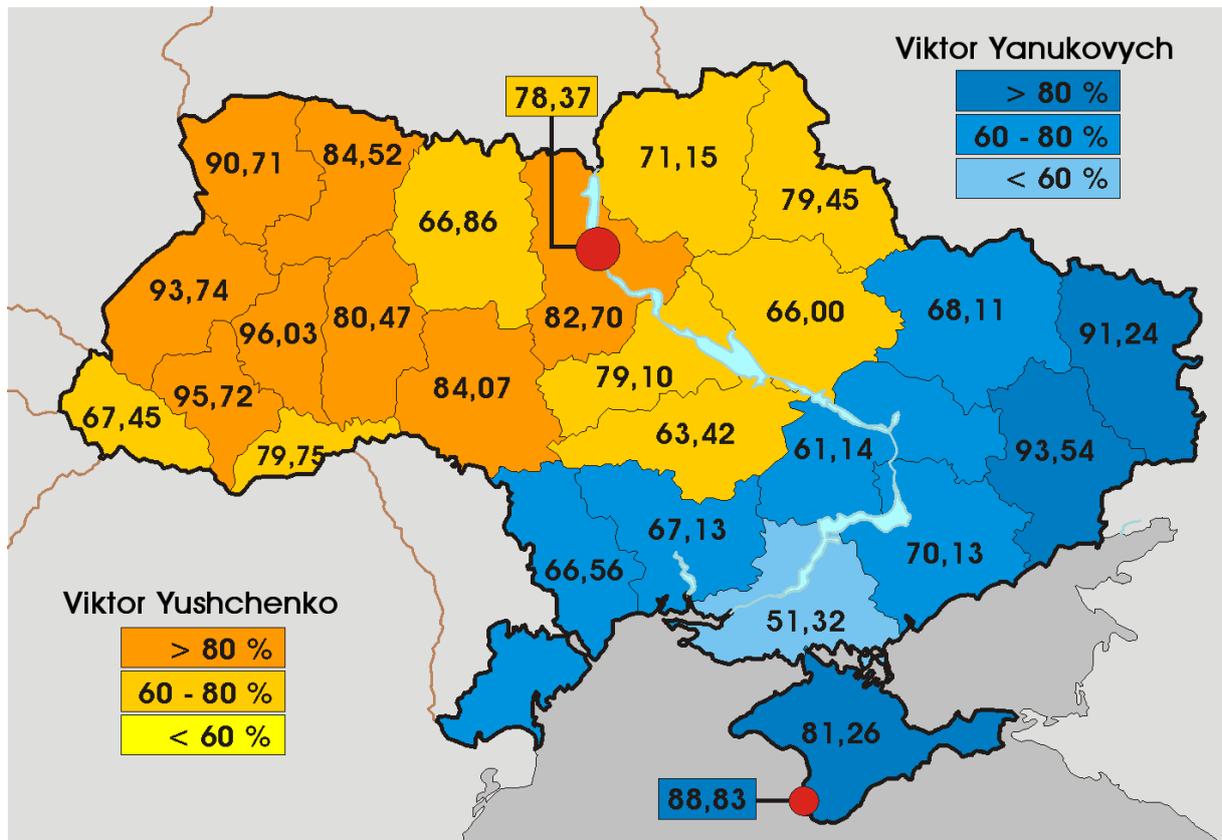


Figure 4: Electoral results in Ukraine in 2010, a perfect image of the country's division

The East of the country (the lower Don) and the South, which includes the entire coast of the Black sea as far as Odessa, are represented in blue. These regions were not part of the Kievan Rus, they belonged to the Ottoman Empire allies (the Crimean Khanate) until Catherine the Great invaded them in the eighteenth century. They had no relation with Ukraine until their arbitrary assignment to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) by the soviets. The extreme case is the Crimea one. Crimea, which belonged to the Russian SSR in 1954, was given "as a present" to Ukraine by Nikita Jrushchov, to celebrate the 300 anniversary of the reunification.

The majority of ethnic Russians (and of Yanukovich's voters) are gathered in this area. After the USSR dissolution, they were "abandoned" in Ukraine, around 8 million people (17% of the total). The proportion of people declaring that their mother tongue is Russian is even bigger (around 30%), even though Ukrainian is the unique official language and the vehicular one at schools. Although Russia has declare in its subsequent security documents that the protection of the ethnic Russians rights abroad is of strategic interest, in the relation with Kiev the Kremlin has adopted an especially pragmatic approach, oriented to maintain in Crimea the Sevastopol naval base for its Black Sea Fleet.

In order to do so, in 1997 an agreement was signed for 20 years with the ex president Kuchma (which included the mutual recognition of the borders), a period that has been extended to 2042 by the president Yanukovich. Despite the fact that for Russians Ukraine will always be called "little Russia", and that for a majority the existence of Ukraine as an independent State is an historical outrage, the major problems of the country come from its own political instability and internal division, reflected in its political defects.

Regarding Belarus, and apart from the western area of Polish influence, the "white Russians" have never considered themselves different from their eastern neighbors. Actually, the degree of self identification and mixed marriages with Russians was the highest of the USSR (and the bilingualism is complete), and the building of a national identity has responded to opportunist interests, as the ones from its authoritarian president Aleksander Lukashenko in power since 1994, rather than to reality. That is why a reunification with Russia in the medium term would not be a surprise.

5. ROMANIA-MOLDAVIA-UKRAINE

Roughly, the current Republic of Moldavia (if we include Transnistria) does not correspond with any known historical entity. This way, the traditional Principality of Moldavia was constituted by the current Republic (except Transnistria), which was called Bessarabia, between the Prut river in the West, the Dniester in the East, and the Black Sea coast in the South; the current Romanian territory of Moldavia (between the Carpathians in the West and the Prut river in the East); and the Bucovina in the northwest, where was located the capital Suceava, and that is currently divided between Ukraine and Romania.

The Principality, with an ethnically Romanian population (Latin but of Orthodox-Christian religion), fell into the hands of the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century. In 1775 the Austro-Hungarian Empire took Bukovina over, in 1812 the Tsarist Empire of Bessarabia, and

the remaining territory was united in the South to Wallachia in 1859 to create the first Romanian State. After World War I, Bessarabia was reunited with Romania. In World War II, and after several comings and goings, that territory was definitely recaptured by the USSR, who removed the Black Sea coast and added Transnistria, primarily populated by Slavs.

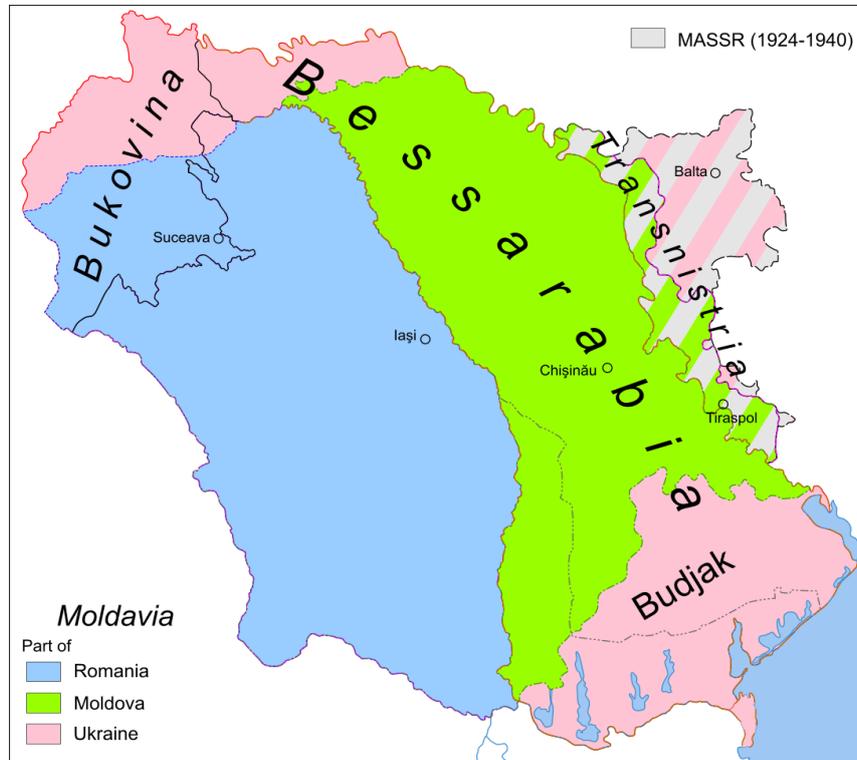


Figure 5: The old Principality of Moldavia

When the movement for independence from the USSR started in Moldavia by the end of the eighties, Slavs (25% of the total population) from the left bank of the Dniester did the same regarding Moldavia. In fact, the proclamation of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR) occurred before the independence of Moldavia from the USSR in 1991, and was consolidated after a brief war in 1992 with the support of the 14th Russian Army, stationed in the area.

Just in 2011, the peace talks restarted to try to reintegrate the PMR in Moldavia, which seems to have no intention to reunify with Romania. While we wait to check its evolution, under an ethnic and historical point of view the vision of Moldavia reunified with a EU member like Romania (with the advantages involved), and a Transnistria reunified with the south region of Ukraine, that as it was already explained is more and more self identified with its Russians roots, is not nonsense.

6. HUNGARY-ROMANIA/SLOVAKIA/SERBIA

The big loser of World War I, if there was one, was Hungary, because after the break-up of the Empire the Magyars (a nation of Hungarian origin that arrived in Central Europe in the ninth century, following the trail of the eastern invasions) held with Austria, they lost up to two thirds of the territory that they had historically occupied in the Carpathians basin. In total, there are still between two and three million ethnical Hungarians (of catholic religion) distributed in the neighboring countries, especially in Romania, Serbia and Slovakia, and the defense of their rights is an interest of the nation, according to the 2005 National Defense Strategy.

This generates tensions that, thankfully, had never ended up in an armed conflict. This way, in Serbia the Hungarians represent 4% of the population (excluding the Kosovars), around 300,000 people gathered in the North of Vojvodina, which autonomy was suppressed by Slobodan Milosevic during the wars in Yugoslavia in the nineties. In Slovakia, the percentage of Hungarian people goes up to 10% (more than 500,000), gathered in the South. The current ultranationalist Hungarian government of the prime minister Viktor Orbán pretends to give the right to vote and the nationality to Hungarians living abroad. This has caused the Bratislava government to announce that citizens accepting this offer from Budapest will be deprived from the Slovakian nationality.



Figure 6: Ethnical groups in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The zone with a Magyar majority is in green

The case of Transylvania deserves a special mention, since 1921 it belongs to Romania. We are facing again a profound historical symbolism, given that when the Ottomans defeated the Magyars in 1526 in the Battle of Mohacs, it was in the Principality of Transylvania, even if they were governed by the Sultan, where the Hungarian identity was kept alive, until the 1689 reunification. Over the years, the territory received huge quantities of Romanians who were escaping from the Turkish control of Wallachia. These Romanians became the majority in the area. Currently, Hungarians represent 6.6% of the total population of Romania (almost a million and a half people), gathered in Transylvania.

Regardless of political views, and as when you stay in Moldavia you cannot appreciate any difference with Romania, when you make a road trip from Bucharest to Brasov by crossing the Carpathians you feel as if you were in a completely different country. This last city is different from Bucharest because it shows a majestic Central European architecture or because the relatively small orthodox churches and their flashy domes are replaced by big catholic temples.

7. GREATER SERBIA-GREATER CROATIA-GREATER ALBANIA- GREAT GREECE

As it was mentioned in the Introduction, in the Balkans the progressive retreat of the Ottoman Empire from the early nineteenth century left an extremely complex political scenario. Frequently, the nations' coalitions against the common enemy (like the one constituted by Serbs, Montenegrins, Greeks and Bulgarians in 1912), ended up in wars between those same allies for the control of the territory (like the war in 1913 of Serbia, Montenegro, Greece and Romania against Bulgaria).

Ethnic minorities of Muslim religion were left in the area, like the Bosniaks or the Albanians and, to complete this picture, after World War I it was decided to unify Serbs and Montenegrins with the rest of "south Slavs", Croatians and Slovenes, of catholic religion and Austro-Hungarian imperial tradition. All these issues were raised after the retreat of a new empire (the Soviet one) and the violent break-up of Yugoslavia, once Tito's iron fist, which had maintain the territory unified for 4 decades, disappeared.

This way, Greater Serbia would consist of the current territory of the country (including the Vojvodina with its Hungarian minority and Kosovo with its Albanian majority), Eastern Slavonia (Vukovar and Osijek) and Krajina in Croatia, the entire territory of the Republika Srpska (in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where 1.5 million Serbs represent 96% of the population) and Montenegro, although the pacific secession of this last country was accepted in 2006. As you can appreciate, to the North, Greater Serbia collides with Greater Hungary which would

include Vojvodina, and, to the West, with Greater Croatia, which would include Slovenia and Krajina (regained from Serb power in 1995 during the Bosnia-Herzegovina war), and a big part of the Bosnian-Croat Federation which has distributed the territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina with the mentioned Republika Srpska, according to the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995. Between Croats and Serbs, we can find Bosniaks of Muslim religion, which represent 45% of the Bosnia-Herzegovina population.



Figure 6: Ethnic groups in the Balkans at the end of the Cold War

The polemical case of Kosovo deserves a special mention, a province of the Serbian South where an armed conflict took place with the Albanian majority at the end of the last century. Apart from the problem of the 8% Serbs living in the North of Kosovo (around Mitrovica), Serbs consider the battle of Kosovo or of "Blackbirds' Field" in 1389, where they were defeated by the Ottomans, as the historical origin of their nation. The province unilaterally declared its independence in February 2008. Until now, it has been recognized by 86 countries, including 22 of the 27 members of the EU, something that has caused the independence de facto of the North of Serbian majority.

Centuries of Turkish dominion caused a Muslims' repopulation in certain areas, like Kosovo, that in the past were populated by a Slav majority. This way, Albanians have not only become strong in this Serbian province, but they have also been a source of conflict in the northwest of Macedonia, where they also represent a majority. If we add the existence of Albania as an independent Nation-State, which constitutes a reference for Albanians abroad, and even the demands on a part of the Greek Epirus in the southeast, we can complete the picture of the Greater Albania.

However, if the Albanians claim South Epirus, the Greeks do the same with Northern Epirus, where a Greek majority of between 3% (according to Tirana) and 10% (according to Greece) lives. Historical myths reach paroxysm in the Greek case, because to the problems of borders delimitation in the Aegean with its traditional enemy, Turkey, we have to add the conflict with the Republic of Macedonia, born from the break-up of Yugoslavia, which Greece demands to call "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (FYROM).

In this case, the mythical mountainous kingdom of Philip and his son Alexander the Great, which achieved to control the group of Greek *polis* in the antiquity, remained in Bulgarian power after the Ottoman retreat in 1912. Serbia became then allies with Greece, and after the victory of 1913, the country kept the north of Macedonia (the later FYROM) and Greece the zone in the south coast in order to deny, after World War I, the exit of Bulgaria to the Aegean and to establish a ground border with the European Turkey. The obvious fear of Greece is that the Republic of Macedonia and the Greek region of Macedonia would want to be reunited, and in order to avoid the temptation, Greece has made their foreign policy conditional to, for a start, deny them the use of their constitutional denomination, banning even the entrance of the FYROM in the NATO in 2009.

8. CONCLUSIONS AND POINTS OF VIEW

Even if we have mentioned numerous cases, there are more left. Apart from the ones already mentioned, there are much more borders' tensions and claims in Central and Eastern Europe. These include cases like the one of the *Sudetes* in the Czech Republic (a mountainous area which borders on Germany and inhabited by Germans, and already occupied by Nazi Germany in 1938), the *Bukovina* (a territory currently distributed between Ukraine and Romania), the *Transcarpatia* (current Ukrainian province of Zakarpattia, which belonged to Czechoslovakia between the two Great Wars), or the borders between Estonia and Latvia, from one side, and Russia, from the other side (because these Baltic Republics lost territory in 1991 with respect to their inter-war independence period). And we have not included the former Soviet Republics from Central Asia, which alone will require a complete

study.

As the Vienna Conference of 1815 redesigned borders after the Napoleonic wars, with the end of the Cold War a review of the borders based on historical and ethnical criteria could have been made, in the framework of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). However, and probably with good judgment, they opted for the scrupulous respect of borders inviolability, with the exception of a peaceful agreement against it, which set up the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 of the CSCE, and the conflicts that emerged were due to the break-up of States like Yugoslavia or the USSR, and not due to fights between already existing States.

Moreover, States that aspired to join one day the EU had to renounce previously to any territorial claim over neighbouring States. This has stabilized the area since 1993. The action that has broken this status-quo has been the foreign military intervention against Serbia, justified in 1999 by the brutality of the Slobodan Milosevic's regime against Albanians of the province, and the recognition of its independence in 2008. Due to the violation of its territorial integrity, Serbia has created a small State impossible to maintain without international help and that in the future will probably join Albania, opening the "Pandora's box" of the frozen conflicts. Therefore, the borders' subject is again a topical issue.

I let you to think about the answer to the question of why should 90% of the Kosovo Albanian have the right to become independent from Serbia, and 96% of Serbs of the Republika Srpska have no right to do the same from Bosnia-Herzegovina, or if the right of Kosovo regarding Serbia should not be the same for Mitrovica regarding Kosovo... and the same could be said about the cases displayed in this document. Therefore, we cannot dismiss other inveterate movements in the very near future, which we hope will be negotiated, peaceful, and with full respect of minorities and people.

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