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## A not so old Balkan tale

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Bridge in Kosovo, Photo: Samir Karahodzha

### Anastasia Balezdrova

The period of Ottoman rule in the Balkans implicates a lot of negativity and tension for most of today's countries of the "hottest" peninsula in Europe. In the minds of most people, this is a dark period and the prevailing trend is that it should be condemned and forgotten.

Thus, we, the Balkans, omit a long period of history, when people lived together despite the differences in

their language and religion within the last empire in Europe.

It is this forgotten part of history that the exhibition entitled A Balkan Tale seeks to bring to the fore. It is organized by the German Goethe Institute supported by the European Union in Athens.

"The project is an attempt to revisit the cultural heritage of the period of the Ottoman rule in the Balkans. We want to look at our region in a new way through the buildings that still exist, but have different functions, or have been destroyed and forgotten," said to GRReporter. Professor in Modern and Contemporary History at the Pandeio University Christina Koulouri, an associate to the programme. The exhibition presents photographs of churches, mosques, synagogues, tombs, bridges, shelters and other buildings and structures of that period. According to recent studies, the Balkan cultural heritage is threatened because over 98 per cent of the monuments have been destroyed.

"This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Balkan wars. On this occasion, we decided to look at the general Balkan history, i.e. how people lived together in the Ottoman Empire before 1912. We are talking about four centuries of co-existence, which we do not remember today. In general, there are a lot of things we do not know about this period," said Rea Apostolidi, historian and producer of the documentary Forgotten Balkans.

Are the Balkan people ready to talk about their common past? "It is impossible to generalize. There are people who may think that they are not ready. But I think the common past is a fact and we should look at it as we look at each other moment of our past. I mean that there is no past that is not common. Every moment of our past is shared by someone else. We do not live separated from one another; walls that no one has ever passed through do not surround us. We are part of the Balkans, some countries are part of the Mediterranean region, then, we are part of Europe and then, we are part of the world. Therefore, we cannot separate our past from the past of others, and especially from the past of our neighbouring nations," replied Christina Koulouri.

Five photographers - Ivan Petrovic from Serbia, Camilo Nolas from Greece, Uta Benzenberg from Albania and Germany, Ivan Blajev from Macedonia and Samir Karahodzha from Kosovo present the specifics of each monument and its present state through their contemporary look. The exhibition will be presented for the first time in Athens, and then, it will take the route Thessaloniki - Belgrade - Pristina - Skopje -

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Visitors note the absence of many other Balkan countries from the exhibition. According to Rea Apostolidi, the European programme has granted funds to certain countries to participate. Historians expressed their will to be included in the programme at a later stage, because the project provides this opportunity.

Christina Koulouri said, "not only Bulgaria is absent. Other countries are also absent such as Romania, Croatia, Bosnia, where there are beautiful ruins of the Ottoman past, such as bridges and other monuments. Perhaps this is a great opportunity for the countries that are not present in the exhibition to organize the presentation of their monuments. That is why they are not arranged by countries. They are mixed namely to emphasize that it does not matter in which country these monuments are today, but that they are part of old city centres of the Ottoman territory."

She said that the programme involves various activities planned to make us reconsider the Balkan history. "One of them is the exhibition of photos that are not simple images and works of photographers - artists. A documentary was filmed within it, entitled Balkan Wars, which involved the teacher from Sofia University Alexei Kalionski. On the [website](#), the visitors can see more photos than those in the exhibition, information on the monuments, and educational programmes for teachers."

Will the exhibition be able to help the hot Balkans begin understanding each other?

"First, it will help us realize how many things we have in common. To understand that there are buildings around us, whose history we are not familiar with. We do not know to which era they belong, when they were built, who lived in them. One such example is the hammams. They were part of the daily lives of people for centuries. Even today, some of them have other functions, like galleries, for example. All these buildings are all around us, but maybe noone realizes that they are the evidence of our common past, of an era when we lived in a different way before the formation of national states."

Many opponents of such initiatives would reprove the project. According to Christina Koulouri, they have nothing to fear.

"We decided that we have gone through the era of national states. After the 1980s, many of us commented that this political model is outdated. I think history refutes this. People continue to be organized within national states. Even now, we see how the European Union finds itself among a supranational policy and national policies.

In the Balkans, the phenomenon is even more intense, especially as we witness the birth of new national states, such as Kosovo. The process of ethno genesis in the Balkans continues."

The exhibition will be open from 10 February to 8 April, 2012 at the Bath of the Winds on 8 Kiristou Street in the Athens Plaka neighbourhood at the foot of the Acropolis. The building is a remnant of the Ottoman era and it functioned as a hammam until 1965. Today, it is one of the art galleries of the Museum of Greek Folk Art. The complete project and the documentary Forgotten Balkans will be presented at the German Goethe Institute (14-16, Omirou Street) on 10 February at 8:30 pm.

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