



Conference Report: Balkan Express 2023: Between Orientalism and Occidentalism

The 7th International and Interdisciplinary Conference in Balkan Studies

Balkan Express 2023: Between Orientalism and Occidentalism

Date: November 10-11, 2023

Location: Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague

Institutional Support:

Faculty of Humanities – Charles University

Institute of History of the Czech Academy of Sciences

Institute of Philosophy, Czech Academy of Sciences (Zora Hesová)

Czech National Committee of Balkan Scholars - Czech Association for Slavonic, Balkan and Byzantine Studies (ČSSBBS)

The conference was supported by Strategy AV 21 – Top Research in Public Interest, the research program of the Czech Academy of Sciences, and the Czech Association for Social Anthropology (CASA).

The final program can be downloaded [here](#).

The link to the official conference video is [here](#).

About the conference

The Balkan Express Conferences, organized since 2013, are the largest conferences in Balkan Studies regularly held in the Czech Republic. The conference was dedicated to the memory of Mirjam Moravcová (1931-2023), ethnologist and Balkan scholar from the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University, co-founder (2013), and organizing committee member.

In 2023, the 7th International Balkan Studies Conference "Balkan Express" focused on the Balkans through concepts of Orientalism and Occidentalism from the 19th century to the present day. At the center of attention were the mechanisms of integration and disintegration, the social construction of local, national, and European identities in Southeastern Europe, and the discourses that further shaped these processes. Orientalism is a term coined by Edward Said, and it refers to the asymmetrical Western perception of the East (i.e., the Orient). In these biased orientalizing perspectives, the East has been typically constructed as "non-European" and as radically different from the rest of the old continent. Occidentalism, a stereotypical and distorted image of the West (Occident), is also present in the Balkans from the 19th century to the present day. In Southeastern Europe, Occidentalism often manifests itself today as the refusal of European integration processes and, at the same time, an attempt to construct a seemingly independent Orthodox Christian civilization inclined towards Russia as opposed to the allegedly "rotten and decadent" West.

The 7th "Balkan Express" conference analyzed the notions, practices, and discourses of Orientalism and Occidentalism from an interdisciplinary perspective (historical, anthropological, political, and cultural perspectives) in order to improve communication between individual disciplines. The conference provided an innovative perspective on the region, which at present (as was also often the case in the past) becomes an unstable and potentially explosive space where

Europe (West), Russia, the Islamic world, and other actors compete for political, economic, and cultural influence.

The conference "Balkan Express: Between Orientalism and Occidentalism" took place on November 10-11, 2023, at the Faculty of Humanities of Charles University in Prague. There were altogether 11 thematic panels with 29 academic presentations (30 minutes per presentation) by 31 active participants from Australia, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, Hungary, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and the United Kingdom. This year's keynote speaker, Hariz Halilovich (RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia), an award-winning anthropologist and professor of Global Studies, delivered a keynote lecture entitled *Global Echoes of the Balkans War Tunes: Popular Culture and (Self-)Orientalism of Imagined Enemies and Real Victims*.

Apart from classical academic presentations, there were also two special book presentations on the program. Krasimira Marholeva (Journal *Balgari*, Prague, Czech Republic), former Ph.D. student and close collaborator of Dr. Mirjam Moravcová (1931-2023), doyenne of Czech ethnology and Balkan studies, co-founder and member of the organizing committee of the Balkan Express conferences, talked about Moravcová's latest book, published just a few days after her passing, the English language monograph entitled *Ethnic Diaspora Festivities in the Czech Republic: Cultural Traditions between Isolation, Integration and Hybridization* (Prague: Karolinum, 2023). Professor Clemens Ruthner (Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland) presented the collective volume *Peter Handkes Jugoslawienkomplex* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2022), which he co-edited together with the literary scholar Vahidin Preljević. The book provides a critical overview of the controversial engagements of the Austrian writer Peter Handke (Nobel Prize for Literature, 2019) in the Balkans and a well-argued deconstruction of his discourse and personal positions on the wars in former Yugoslavia.

The final cultural program was provided by Aida Mujačić, singer and musicologist living and working in Prague, who performed several traditional songs from her native Bosnia and Herzegovina in Bosnian (*sevdalinke*) and Ladino (the language of the Sephardic Jews) and also explained their historical as well as musical genesis to the public. The main social event and informal networking took place at Lastavica – Association for the Citizens of Former Yugoslavia near Prague's central Wenceslas Square. Lastavica has been actively promoting tolerance, multicultural understanding, and the cultivation of links and exchanges between the countries of former Yugoslavia and the Czech Republic.

František Šístek and Markéta Slavková

On behalf of the Organizing Committee of the Balkan Express Conferences

**Photographs were taken by Domingo Mohedano, Markéta Slavková and Boris Skenderija.*

