Depiction of the Balkans on Internet Memes from 9GAG[1]

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Contrary to all the techno-optimistic expectations regarding the liberating and equalising impacts of online communication – especially of web 2.0 and the emerging social media – stereotypes and oppressive practices are still widespread in discourses on online platforms in many online genres, including Internet memes or meme-aggregating platforms. Researchers have studied many aspects of emergence of stereotypes regarding skin colour, sexual orientation, or gender, but there is a notable research gap in analysing stereotypes towards a special region of Europe: the Balkan Peninsula and its nations. What is more, no research can be found that examines Balkan stereotypes in Internet memes, especially not in a quantitative way on a larger sample. Working with 595 meme specimens from the popular 9GAG portal, this research seeks to learn more about this phenomenon: to find signs of the asymmetric relationship between the Western centrum and the periphery or semi-periphery, as represented by the Balkan states. This study seeks to identify the critical elements of how these stereotypes are displayed, and to compare these elements and their correlations. Another dimension of this research is a review of audience reactions as gauged by "likes", comments and relative popularity.

Keywords: memes, social media, stereotypes, audience research

Introduction

Internet penetration is growing worldwide, so social media is used by billions of users every day regardless of their culture, geographical location, or – thanks to mobile technology – actual location, even if they move in the meantime, and, day by day, even

a person's financial situation also affects this matter less and less, and the level of digital literacy (Jenkins, 2009) has also been increasing, e.g. in Europe (Eurostat, 2022).

In this highly diverse online environment, Internet memes have also shown up on several platforms that are not planned particularly for this kind of content, (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, etc.). However, many venues were designed for a significant or even exclusive internet meme-based discourse: Reddit belongs to the former, with 430 million visitors a month; the latter refers to 9GAG, which has 150 million unique visitors and generates 3.5 billion page views per month. People as so-called prosumers – consumers who also produce (described first by Alvin Toffler [1980], applied to today's conditions by, among others, George Ritzer and Nathan Jurgenson [2010]), which is basically the spirit of web 2.0. So they do the same on 9GAG as content creators, sharers and recipients.

Globalisation and Western Centralism

The fact that internet memes have gone global over the last 15 years – is called "user-generated globalization" by Limor Shifman (2014: 151). However, English is still widespread (Börzsei, 2013: 9), which connects people easily through cultures, irrespective of their English skills. For this reason, Milner (2013: 2) called memes "the lingua franca of the Internet". This term describes some aspects of this phenomenon: the phrase "lingua franca" implies some inequality as it is as a pidgin language, has its superstrate and substrate. Milner insisted that the former is the popular culture, and the latter is the others, the marginalised ones. But its superstrate, in a global sense, and following the analogy of Milner (2013) and Börzsei (2013), is consequently the English language, and – what is more – another bunch of non-textual elements, including predominantly Western cultural codes that, according to one of this paper's hypothesis, dominates even the meme of typical non-western people, too.

But this is only a symptom: a symptom of what has been called multiple times "constructed centrality" by Ryan Milner (2013, 2016), who borrowed this term from Ronald Jackson, Chang Shin and Keith Wilson (2000), and called later "the hegemony of the implicit reader"; as Eviatar Zerubavel in his book *Taken for Granted. The Remarkable Power of the Unremarkable* (2018). All of them mean that the default member of a group is a Western, white, heterosexual (probably: middle-class) man, as underlined by the results of Lori Kendall's research (2002).

Humour and hierarchy

9GAG has another characteristic or feature: albeit many social media platforms introduced some moderation in the last decade, there are almost no signs of this practice. The lack of moderation favours the texts with discriminating discourses and stereotypes. These phenomena have been researched since the 2010s: stereotypes towards women, people of colour, LGBTQ+ people, etc. Negative stereotypes as less, and positive ones as more favourable beliefs about social groups (e.g. Glick and Fiske, 1996; Madon et

al., 2001); and even added so-called neutral ones (Bergsieker et al., 2012; León et al., 2013). A mixture of positive, negative, or neutral stereotypes is common. For example, the research of Czopp et al. (2006) revealed that White individuals who believed African Americans have better musical rhythm also believed they were lazy.

As the critical role of humour in 1. easily spreading this type of content (see more in the "Related works" section), and 2. in maintaining and reinforcing the hierarchy between the representations of privileged people, nations, countries, sex, and cultures, and of the looked downs.

Regarding the first aspect, it is a widely researched topic from Jenkins et al. (2009) to Milner (2016): to reveal the relationship between humour and virality (or in the case of Jenkins et al.: spreadability (2009: 3), who associated the logic of the gift economy with spreading internet memes (Jenkins et al., 2009: 43–62), and that gift, inferred from this, the laughter itself.

But how could humour displayed by internet memes maintain and even reinforce the differences in power? The answer is probably easily explainable along Shifman's often-cited dimensions of memes: content, form and stance (2014: 41), although this division is to be understood here as support for the conceptualisation.

As for the content and form, power asymmetry could be maintained via a new requirement that, according to Shifman (2014: 101–118) and Milner (2016: 30), could be called "meme literacy" and completed the former competence (digital literacy) as an additional one. Meme literacy means understanding and applying plenty of subcultural knowledge about ideas and cultural texts and how they should be used in the online space: norms and (sub)cultural contexts as parts of the content, genres, characters, etc., as parts of the form. And these elements of knowledge, based on common (sub)cultural knowledge (2009: 4), determine the right and wrong interpretation of these ideas and right and wrong usage of the cultural texts (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017: 484–486). Improper usage can suggest the lack of expected knowledge; with the lack of knowledge, a user can easily be seen as an illiterate, so an outsider, in the model of classical literacy. Creating and sharing internet memes – in a proper way, of course – prove that the user speaks that certain "lingua franca" mentioned before and – holding this analogy – knows its "vocabulary" or the also mentioned codex, which is, as Nissenbaum and Shifman called it, based on Pierre Bourdieu's logic, "the canon of good and bad taste" (2017: 484). Part of this meme literacy is the knowledge about humour, and, according to Henry Jenkins, knowing this, also helps make a difference between insiders and outsiders. As Anne Leiser put it, understanding humour and employed this way does exclude those who do not know its language, but strengthens the in-group (Leiser, 2019: 108).

Stereotypes often serve as the basis of humour: as Shifman listed the topics that usually emerge as a theme of a joke, we can see that most of them rely on differences; therefore, on the potential of making positive–negative or superior–inferior relations among mentioned categories. These topics are: language, sex, politics, ethnicity, religion and age (Shifman, 2007: 189), so the meme creator can get inspiration from stereotypes easily. But not all of the stereotypes, to be more precise, not everyone's. It is also a crucial part of creating proper internet memes to learn and internalise that so-called subcultural codex, edited by users who take part in that discourse. But not all the users

and not equally edited by them but predominantly by those who are, most probably unconsciously, part of the "constructed central" (Milner, 2013, 2016). This feature implies maintaining power differences via different opportunities for accessing the codex. To cite Nissenbaum and Shifman, "these are designated by those who enjoy high regard in the group and thus wield the symbolic power to curate" the mentioned "canon of good and bad taste": composing the proper memes, referring to the proper cultural context, carrying out in a proper way with proper elements, an internet meme considered to be humorous.

Continuing with Shifman's dimensions, in this explanation, stance also plays an important role. Among others, it also refers to the power unbalance between the represented groups, people, or their cultural elements, and humour has a particularly outstanding feature to convey it. Both Shifman and Leiser identified different attributes and elements of humour amongst internet memes; the former researcher analysed the role of playfulness, incongruity and superiority, while Leiser changed playfulness to relief, emphasising its tension-relieving function relieving tensions and came to that conclusion regarding superior humour that common laughter on out-group members can also unite people within a group (2019: 39). The situation is a little bit different when the target of the laughter is also a member of the in-group, but somehow not part of the "curator" group of the codex aforementioned, nor the "constructed central". E.g. a user related to the target, for instance, a black man and a meme, joking about the character of a "successful black man" or Afro-American symbols, etc.

In these cases, the type of humour can also maintain and reinforce this power unbalance and problematic stereotypes (Drakett et al., 2018: 32), and those, who, as participants, feel their identical references in the crosshairs, should face harsh conditions too: there is an expectation towards them to not simply deny the stereotypical representation: the group threatens with degrading humour or even exclusion those, who "do not get the joke" (Drakett et al., 2018: 32), or criticise soft and feminine "emotionalism" – according to the so-called "logic of lulz" (Milner, 2016: 136–137) or "Exclusionary Laughter" (Phillips, 2019: 1).

Strategies and possibilities for the "Others"

In this asymmetric relationship, humour maintains hierarchy; but users who are not part of the "constructed central" can choose their own strategy. The position is more or less in connection with the applied type of humour: according to Michael Billig (2005) and based on the research of Holmes (2000), participants who are part of the dominant group, use "superior" (Shifman, 2014: 79–81), disciplinary – or repressive – humour, "quirky", as others call it, (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007: 206–207) – using, e.g. stereotypes mocking those who are outside social norms. Those who are outside "whilst conversely rebellious humor mocks and subverts established rules and conventions" (Drakett et al., 2018: 6). And there is a third and fourth strategy of the second group: joining the "superior" narrative and humour type honestly. This is what Marion Young described as internalising the central-determined stereotypes, making them autostereotypes, basically offering

the same narrative as the "constructed central" – or doing this but ironically – thus denying them. The last one is called rebellious humour by Billig or "reverse" humour by Weaver (2010: 30–31), which is (critically) enjoyed by the target group that mocks the stereotypes and users who recite them.

"Balkan memes" can be examined from many perspectives, as mentioned above. What is more, we can observe the process of generalising in its finest form. The Balkans include at least ten different countries (Crampton et al., 2023): Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia, altogether some 60 million people.

As we will see in the following section, there is almost no research on the Balkans from the perspective of internet memes. While the representation of the Balkans in Western public discourse could fill an entire paper on its own, here my more modest aim is only to briefly summarise the most relevant thoughts that connect internet memes through power asymmetry and stereotypes to theories about Balkan representation.

Related works

As for theory, we could begin by referring to some very essential studies and research from 1. the areas of orientalism and post-colonialism regarding the Balkans; and 2. internet meme-related. The two approaches can be combined in an interdisciplinary approach, linking both to stereotypes, but we can also examine them separately.

The foundations of the power asymmetry approach came from, on the one hand, József Böröcz's (2001) study and, on the other, Larry Wolff's *Inventing Eastern Europe* who studied the historical background of the eastern/western dichotomy. Böröcz's theory is based on a very economical approach, whilst Wolff concluded that the world's western part has a strong cultural need for the eastern one, particularly as an antithesis that supports their own self-definition. After that, based on Edward Said's classic work, *Orientalism,* Milica Bakić-Hayden, in her work "Nesting Orientalism. The Case of Former Yugoslavia" (1995), pointed out that Eastern Europeans are the opposite of what Western Europeans thought about themselves: the civilised and civilising ones; that "barbaric" side of this representation of Balkan people, citing Rebecca West, who only remembers one thing about the Balkans: "violence" (Bakić-Hayden, 1995: 917–918). A remarkable attempt is by Marija Todorova in her book *Imaging the Balkans* (1997), based on Said's *Orientalism,* in which she developed the concept of "Balkanism" and emphasised the existence of the phenomenon of generalisation. Later she published *Balkanism and Postcolonialism, or On the Beauty of the Airplane View* (2010), Vesna Goldsworth (1998) in *Inventing Ruritania* studied how the Balkan "otherness" was structured from the Renaissance myths to contemporary British literature, containing the symbolic distinction between West and East. From the viewpoint of postcolonialism, among others, David Chioni Moore wrote a great essay (2006), revealing that although the countries of the former Eastern Bloc were under Soviet rule, local postcolonialism does not target them but the West, which is both envied and, due to its exclusion, hated in the post-Soviet regions. Dubravka Juraga's study (1996) attempted to draw a parallel

between Africa and the Balkans, while Ihar Babkou's "A modern/posztkoloniális a kelet-európai határvidéken" [The Modern/Postcolonial at the Eastern European Borderland] (2012) gave a comprehensive picture of this research field. Finally, Alexander Kiossev's study (1995) emphasised the recipients' self-colonising processes under the banner of modernisation in arts, including the uncriticised internalisation of all that is Western being equated with "civilisation".

From the side of internet meme-related studies, some of the most important books and studies were mentioned in the previous chapter: Knobel and Lankshear (2007) and Jenkins (2009), Jenkins et al. (2009). From the very beginning of the internet meme conception, Shifman (2014), Milner (2013, 2016), and Börzsei (2013) as researchers who further developed the scientific discourse about internet memes, Drakett et al. (2018) and Leiser (2019), who focused their research more on stereotypes, however, Shifman and Milner also touched on the issue for a few chapters. At the same time, in addition to the above, researching stereotypes among internet memes is not a no-man's land: there are plenty of (mostly qualitative) studies regarding people of colour (e.g. Yoon, 2016; Williams et al., 2016, Drakett et al., 2018, Matamoros-Fernández, 2020), women (e.g. Phillips, 2015) and sexual minorities (Noam Gal et al., 2015).

Internet memes on a non-western topic have been examined less frequently, and if at all, then generally with a strong political communication approach. One work is Anastasia Denisova's *Internet Memes and Society* (2019), which is also a summary, but the ambiance and the corpus examined are memes on Russian Twitter, mostly opposition creators. The same is true for the Chinese memes studied by Wand et al. (2016), the Singapore memes in the analysis of Sreekumar and Vadrevu (2013), or Büsra Kilic's paper (2017) on so-called "caps" culture in Turkey. This culture is rooted in the avant-garde and was reborn via internet memes in Turkey, making it a great example of cultural idiosyncrasy combined with global patterns and elements (Denisova, 2019: 46).

In addition to the aforementioned aspects, most research examining internet memes is qualitative. Quantitative or hybrid research with a large sample – over 100–200 elements – is especially rare. There are of course a few examples, like Nissenbaum et al. – including Shifman (2015) – who carried out network research on 1,013 internet memes creating the "meme family" and the "quiddity" concept (i.e. certain key elements that link internet memes, see below). Another, relatively large, sample of humorous memes was examined by Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015), who did qualitative research on the type of humour in 651 internet memes, but quantified the results.

In sum, the research gap is Balkan memes examined from a post-colonialist view-point, with logics of critical discourse analysis, on a convincingly sized pattern to reveal stereotypes and their characteristics that convey power asymmetry.

Proposed methods

The following three main research questions were selected:
- – Q1: What kind of stereotypes appear in the memes examined?
- – Q2: What are the visual or textual elements used to convey these stereotypes?

- Q3: What is the connection between the stereotypes, the visual or textual elements, and the recipients' reactions?

As mentioned above, the research takes a clearly critical point of view; the starting point is given by Norman Fairclough's text-based critical discourse analysis, which seeks to identify signs of inequality in the text. The basic unit of analysis is the internet meme, based on Michael Foucault's (1980) *énoncé* (a meaningful "statement" that could serve an interest or rebel against it), as Lankshare and Knobel analysed internet memes with discourse analysis (2007).

In this research, I took a hybrid approach, mixing qualitative and quantitative methods (triangulation), which examined the Balkan internet memes themselves, as well as recipients' reactions. The latter could be deduced to some extent by counting "likes" (or "points", as it is called on 9gag.com). The framework could be interpreted via a simplified adaptation of David Berlo's SMCR model (see Figure 1 below).


ADAPTATION OF DAVID BERLO SMCR-MODEL (1960)
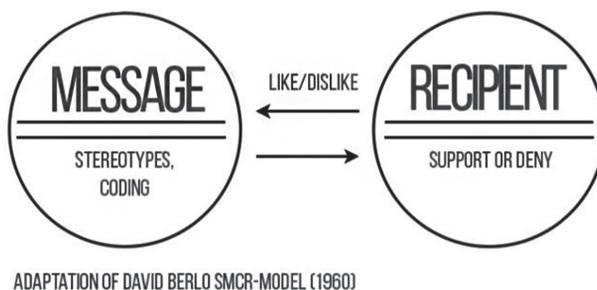
Figure 1: Adaptation of Davie Berlo's SMCR model
Source: Compiled by the author (based on Berlo, 1960).

The first part – the sender – is missing, as it could not be examined due to the semi-hidden appearance (near-anonymity) of the original posters, and the available means (personal interviews) for analysing how these are communicated could only provide very little quantifiable results and are therefore not sufficiently representative.

As far as the messages – the memes – are concerned: the dimensions of the analysis along which the coding took place were classified into three main groups, inspired by Shifman's content–form–stance system and by the quiddity concept of Nissenbaum et al.

In the figure below, "content" contains the stereotype appearing in the meme. The appearance of the stereotype (and its subdimensions) and the genre of the internet meme falls under "form", while the attitude towards to the stereotype constitutes the "stance" category. The three subdimensions – character, action or behaviour and textual parts known as "phrase" according to Nissenbaum et al. – can be connected to the mysterious quiddity that "unites instances into one family and the generic attributes defining the mainstream culture of the memetic sphere" (Nissenbaum et al., 2015: 422).
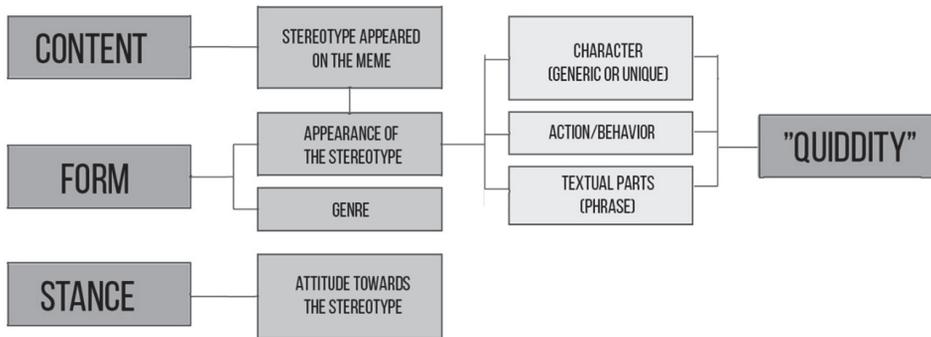
Figure 2: Synthesis of the useful elements of the most important theories
Source: Compiled by the author.

The codebook itself was compiled using inductive and deductive methods, thus partly based on the dimensions and approaches of former research, and partly on the findings of the precoding, which were carried out on 10% of the entire sample and checked by a secondary coder. I coded the whole corpus manually, and then 10% of the sample was checked by the secondary coder as well.

Let us see the details of the dimensions. To specify the stereotypes (Q1) that appeared in the internet memes of the corpus, there should be some initial set of categories. As stereotypes on the Balkans is a barely researched topic, not only in the field of online communication, but in general as well, the stereotype categories of Elza Ibroscheva from her Russian-related survey (Ibroscheva, 2002) was the strongest deductive pillar, and the precoding of 10% of the sample led us to a reliable set of stereotypes.

As we will see, there were certain basically different types of stereotypes that could be identified: stereotypes with more positive connotations, as *family-oriented, pretty women* or *hospitable;* others that were more neutral (though this depends on recipients' attitudes) connotations as *cunning/tricky, tough, macho, impetuous, religious* or *hairy.* There were others that were connected to what can be described as "self-destructive" or "decadent" lifestyle: *glutton, carnivorous, heavy drinker, heavy smoker;* there were some that were related to underdeveloped economics: as *bad infrastructure, poor, old/ tuned vehicles* or *speaking broken English;* and, finally, there were some that could be called negative stereotypes, mostly related to peoples projected "bad" nature: *aggressive, barbarian, criminal* or *lazy.*

As for the form, there are several dimensions and sub-dimensions (Q2). Conceptual-ising the genre of a meme was simple and easy to define, relying on the typology of Ryan Milner, who synthesised and categorised 13 genres of internet memes (2016: 84–86) depending on their composition and style specifics. The more complicated dimension was the appearance of the stereotypes. This had three sub-dimensions, borrowed from Nissenbaum et al. (2015) who actually found five, but their first category, the object category, melted in the action/behaviour category. This was because the precoding proved that objects could embody any stereotypes and connect to actions or behaviour:

e.g. a heavily laden table connects to the practice of the feast, not to an object (e.g. the table), or, in the case of some grey panel houses on the meme, the action – living in them – is inseparable from the object. What is more, there were plenty of elements that added nothing to the meaning of the meme, so coding them automatically seemed to be completely unnecessary and distracting, because the aim of the research was finding *differentia specificas.* As well, the focus was on striking elements: e.g. if a meme contained roads, traffic signs, houses, and some mountains in the background, but the meaning – conveyed by, for instance, the title "Balkan road repair. Ohrid, Macedonia" – brought viewers' attention to the road, then the other elements were not coded. So, in this dimension we listed different elements (squatting, beating children, over-sexualisation, corruption, autocratic moves, etc.), clothing of people, the infrastructure (buildings, roads, playgrounds, markets, etc.) that play a role in the meaning of the meme and reinforcing or challenging the appeared stereotype, as well as vehicles used, and – because it seemed to be extremely important – gastronomy.

The same effect of melting into the category of simple *character* happened with specific or unique characters and generic characters. The former means a certain character like Tom, the cat from the cartoon movie, while the generic character means its category, in this case: "cat". In this sample, however, precoding showed that there were very blurry border areas. Although creating new memes from a character makes it unique or specific, using communication for a certain way brings it closer to a generic, or generic but unnamed, character became specific via usage, etc. Thus, analysing them in a way that Nissenbaum et al. (2015) did would have resulted in some duplications (e.g. Tom and "cat") distorting the figures. What is more, the typology of Nissenbaum et al. was built upon focusing *image macros,* but they are only one genre from the 12 conceptualised by Milner. Moreover, as the sample showed, this is not as common as it was six years ago. Thus, in the typology adapted to the theme, the decisive factor was whether a displayed character was more generic or more specific/unique, and, e.g. Tom is more a well-known, specific cartoon character than a "cat".

Another sub-dimension was added to them: in many cases not only the area but certain countries are marked on the meme, showing to the recipients that, however, many can see the Balkans as a homogenous unit, there is a lot of diversity – but attention was paid to them only when some conflict occurred.

Textual parts, or, according to Nissenbaum et al. (2015), "phrase" should be applied also in a differentiated way. Because the emphasis was on stereotypes instead of on classic text analysis, the focus was on two things: one that we called "textual difference marker": any textual manifestation in the title or on the meme itself that refers to differences from the "norm" (a.k.a. "constructed centrality"). In this approach, we distinguished 15 categories of textual difference markers inductively from the analysed texts. The other aspect is the sharers' possible involvement: any indication that the user who shared or made the meme is connected somehow to the Balkans. This could help to distinguish auto-and hetero-stereotypes. What is more, these phrases were completely the sharers' products (they had to type them in before sharing the image format meme), so these can be taken to definitely represent their own thinking.

This is the main reason that this dimension was, in this case, connected more to the attitude towards the stereotype in question. Therefore in this research, this dimension was mostly analysed from the perspective of the *stance*. Pragmatically, as visual parts, too, also relying on the humour strategies mentioned in the Introduction section. These strategies were leading to a methodologically interpretable direction, with their relation to the represented stereotypes on an internet meme, as a meme can agree with and challenge that stereotype, formally. But, in addition to this, the pragmatic approach revealed to us that if a meme agreed with the stereotype, but did so ironically, that was a stereotype-challenging relation. If on the other hand a meme's stance challenged the stereotype, but ironically, that meant that the meme pragmatically represented an agreeing opinion.

After identifying all the stereotypes and elements, the second phase was about searching for the connections between them: what stereotypes correlate with each other and what connections emerge. It was challenging to find a useful method to reveal these correlations because of the composition of the dataset extracted from findings. Most of the data was binary coded, except for the number of points (see below), so we used a hybrid method: a simple correlation analysis, which strengthened the assumed connections, and weighted this by the amount of the concomitance of the elements – the latter method was helpful to filter those correlations that were strong only because of the low number of items.

However, there was no opportunity to measure recipients' reactions to the Balkan memes in a detailed way. To answer Q2 and Q3 in a cumulative manner, an additional dimension should be added: the number of points given by recipients on the 9gag website, which made this data quantifiable. In this manner, it was possible to learn what stereotypes, or attitude towards certain stereotypes, or visual or textual elements were popular, rewarded by actual consumers of this digital content.

Data collection

The sample was also collected manually from the aforementioned popular meme-aggregator site called 9gag.com, relying on its search engine, searching key words: *Balkan, Balkans, Balkanic.* The result of the search: 556 memes listed – every copy of a meme counts as a separate one, even if it has only a tiny difference.

There were also some other principles: only still images were included in the sample because video memes would have necessitated a very different approach and would have jeopardised comparability. Although individual national discourses would also have been interesting, the research focused on communication in the larger, international public, so only content in English was examined. For the sake of representativity, only popular memes were examined that gained at least some degree of popularity: at least 20 points (this is a minimum for the "trending" section, which makes the meme more visible) or 5 comments from users (which presupposes that it was a discussion starter meme).

After applying these filters, the amount of the sample decreased to 493 memes.

Limitation: unfortunately, there was no opportunity to carrying out a huge text analysis on 20,035 comments because only a small part of comments can be seen or copied, so this attempt failed in the phase of planning data mining.

Results

Stereotypes

The findings showed that 652 stereotypes appeared on the 493 Balkan memes – an average of slightly more than one (1.3) each. The most common stereotypes can be seen on the following table.

Table 1: Stereotypes

stereotype	appea-rance	% of the appeared stereotypes	% of memes
glutton	99	15.2%	20%
cunning/trickv	68	10.4%	13.8%
tough	63	9.7%	12.8%
carn1vorous	57	8.7%	11.5%
aggress1ve	55	8.4%	11.1%
inappropriate (outdated, tasteless or ripped) clothes	52	8%	10.5%
heavy drinker	51	7.8%	10.3%
bad infrastructure	40	6.1%	8.1%
barba rian	36	5.5%	7.3%
poor	23	3.5%	4.7%
old/tuned vehicle	23	3.5%	4.7%
fa mily-oriented	22	3.4%	4.5%
macho	21	3.2%	4.3%
criminal	19	2.9%	3.8%
dumb	19	2.9%	3.8%
impetuous	17	2.6%	3.4%
pretty women	11	1.7%	2.2%
relig·ious	8	1.2%	1.6%
lazv	6	0.9%	1.2%
hair	6	0.9%	1.2%
heavy smoker	6	0.9%	1.2%
hospitable	5	0.8%	1.0%
spea k broken English	0	0.0%	0.0%

Source: Compiled by the author.

Characters

Characters, generic and unique/specific ones – were also widespread among Balkan memes. It was not an easy task to differentiate between them. We can see that intertextuality, as Milner (2016) pointed out, was highly remarkable: there were many characters from Western popular culture (movies, series, cartoons, comics, etc., e.g. *Peter Parker* as Spiderman, *Tom,* the cat from the Tom&Jerry cartoon), from well-known Western based meme characters as Orange Jacket Guy – as we can see, borders are not so strict, as the meme named "Tom calls" belongs to both of them; and there were Balkan-related characters as well. As we can see, Balkan memes are rich in characters applied to the topic, 194 characters were found connected to the sample.

Below we can see the results:

Table 2: Popular characters and their frequency

Characters	Appearance	% of the appeared characters	% of memes
Countryballs	25	12.9%	5.1%
Babushkas	21	10.8%	4.3%
(Pretty) women	14	7.2%	2.8%
Living animals in meaningful roles	14	7.2%	2.8%
Orange Jacket Guy babushka version	10	5.2%	2.0%
Balkan politicians	8	4.1%	1.6%
Daddies	8	4.1%	1.6%
Orange Jacket Guy	8	4.1%	1.6%
Gopniks	4	2.1%	0.8%
Tom	4	2.1%	0.8%
Peter park	4	2.1%	0.8%
Simpsons	4	2.1%	0.8%
Nat from Sponge Bob	4	2.1%	0.8%
E.T.	4	2.1%	0.8%
"Increasing"	3	1.5%	0.6%
Monkey puppet	3	1.5%	0.6%
"Baby yoda"	3	1.5%	0.6%
Matthew McConaughey	3	1.5%	0.6%
Gangsters	2	1.0%	0.4%

Characters	Appearance	% of the appeared characters	% of memes
"Starter pack"	2	1.0%	0.4%
Duct-Tape Guy	2	1.0%	0.4%
Futurama character	2	1.0%	0.4%
Roll safe meme	2	1.0%	0.4%
Waiting family with knives meme	2	1.0%	0.4%
Manga	1	0.5%	0.2%
C3PO	1	0.5%	0.2%
Bear Grylls "Improvise. Adapt. Overcome"	1	0.5%	0.2%
Others	35	18.5%	7.1%
Total	194	100.0%	39.3%

Source: Compiled by the author.

Actions/behaviours/habits

The dimensions aforementioned mixing some aspects could be another strong marker of the Balkan meme family, with sub-dimensions: clothing, behaviour, infrastructure, vehicles and gastronomy. As these were not discrete categories, total amount of "% of memes" could not be shown.

Table 3: Behaviour and appearance

	Actions/behaviours/habits	Appear-ance	% of the appeared ones	% of memes
Outdated or tasteless clothing	Retro/tastelessness/outdated clothes	24	31.6%	4.9%
	Folk clothes	12	15.8%	2.4%
	Crocheted textiles	12	15.8%	2.4%
	"Adidas"	11	14.5%	2.2%
	Others	17	22.4%	3.4%
	Total	76	100.0%	15.4%

	Actions/behaviours/habits	Appear-ance	% of the appeared ones	% of memes
Behaviour/ phenomena	International tensions in the Balkans	71	24.7%	14.4%
	Botchery	53	18.4%	10.8%
	Corruption/autocracy	23	8.0%	4.7%
	Nationalism	18	6.3%	3.7%
	Die hard	16	5.6%	3.2%
	To be a "true" Balkanic	12	4.2%	2.4%
	Science	10	3.5%	2.0%
	Parental abuse	8	2.8%	1.6%
	Language specifics	8	2.8%	1.6%
	Nostalgia	8	2.8%	1.6%
	Explicit expression meaning "this is a shitty place!"	7	2.4%	1.4%
	Jerk driving	7	2.4%	1.4%
	Pride	4	1.4%	0.8%
	Tooth loss	4	1.4%	0.8%
	Circumventing the rules	4	1.4%	0.8%
	Sexuality	3	1.0%	0.6%
	Others	33	11.5%	6.7%
	Total	288	100.0%	58.4%
Infrastructure	Panel house	15	31.9%	3.0%
	Poor rural landscape	10	21.3%	2.0%
	Road in poor condition	7	14.9%	1.4%
	House (ramshackle/tasteless)	4	8.5%	0.8%
	Playground	2	4.3%	0.4%
	Beauty of natural landscape	2	4.3%	0.4%
	Bedroom/restroom	2	4.3%	0.4%
	Beauty of buildings	1	2.1%	0.2%
	Others	4	8.5%	0.8%
	Total	47	100.0%	9.5%
Vehicles	Western car brands	17	54.8%	3.4%
	Eastern car brands	4	12.9%	0.8%
	Special vehicles	10	32.3%	2.0%
	Total	31	100.0%	6.3%

	Actions/behaviours/habits	Appear-ance	% of the appeared ones	% of memes
	Meats	57	30.2%	11.6%
	Grilled food/grilling as a process	24	12.7%	4.9%
Gastronomy	National dishes	50	26.5%	10.1%
	Alcoholic drinks	42	22.2%	8.5%
	Others	16	8.5%	3.2%
	Total	189	100.0%	38.3%

Source: Compiled by the author.

There was an added sub-dimension about countries in the memes; however, particular national tendencies were not examined in this research.

Table 4: Countries and their representation in numbers

Former Yugoslavian states or entities (Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, (North)Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia)	226
Balkans outside of the former Yugoslavia (Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Romania)	99
Other Eastern European countries (Belarus, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Ukraine)	24
Turkey	13
Western European countries	15
Other first-world countries	8
Former countries (Austria–Hungary, Byzantine, Yugoslavia, Roman Empire, Soviet Union)	13
Total	398

Source: Compiled by the author.

Genres

The only discrete category was the genres; using Milner's typology, the results were the following:

Table 5: Genres and their appearance

Genres	Appearance	% of memes
Stacked stills	165	33.5%
Photos	153	31.0%
Annotated stills	52	10.5%
Shops	34	6.9%
Graphs	25	5.1%
Macros	21	4.3%
Screenshots	13	2.6%
Texts	12	2.4%
Drawings	10	2.0%
Rage comics	4	0.8%
Demotivationals	2	0.4%
Memes "IRL"	2	0.4%
Quotes	0	0.0%
Total	493	100.0%

Source: Compiled by the author.

Textual parts and the attitude

As for the first part – textual difference markers – the results showed the amount of them with a few examples:

Table 6: "Language difference markers" and their forms

"Language difference marker"	Appearance	Example
Meaning: "here is a normal thing" (despising, "no comment")	33	*"Slavic childhood memories"*
Summary	3	*"Balkan in a nutshell"*
Explicit expression of "it's bad to live here"	4	*"My country is no longer European"*
Achievement/speciality	2	*"Golden section Slav"*
Comparison	20	*"Only in Bosnia"*
(Insider) knowledge	20	*"Balkans will relate"*
Presentation ("look how things are going here")	21	*"Balkans be like…"*
Emotional expression	5	*"I love Balkans"*
Normative expression	10	*"It couldn't be more Slavic than this"*
Exaggeration	1	*"Slav power!"*

"Language difference marker"	Appearance	Example
Hidden, inner self	1	*"Modern house but you are from the Balkans"*
Strangeness of a foreign language	7	*"Nazdravjle"*
Resist	3	*"My culture is not your goddamn prom dress"*
Total	130	–

Source: Compiled by the author.

The other part was about the sharers' connection to the Balkans: there was the expression of connection on 56 memes, or 11.4% of the sample.

Concerning attitudes: agreement was overwhelmingly more common than challenging attitudes:

Table 7: Attitudes and their distribution

	Attitude	No. of appearances	% of memes*
Agreeing	Agreeing straightforward	386	78.3%
	Denying/challenging ironic	70	14.2%
Denying/challenging	Agreeing ironic	21	4.3%
	Denying/challenging straightforward	14	2.8%

*Only one meme did not refer to any stereotype.
Source: Compiled by the author.

Meaningful correlations

As for Q3, there was not an easy task to find correlations between the stereotypes due to the low average value on one meme (1.36), particularly not when weighted with the number of common appearance and all appearance. Nine of them stood out:

Table 8: Stereotypes and their correlations

Stereotype #1		Stereotype #2	P	No. of common appearance	% of all the appearances of S#1	% of all the appearances of S#2
Glutton	&	carnivorous	0.67	54	54.5%	94.7%
Aggressive	&	tough	0.17	16	29.1%	25.4%
Cunning/tricky	&	bad infrastructure	0.14	12	17.6%	30.0%
Macho	&	tough	0.25	11	52.4%	17.5%

Stereotype #1		Stereotype #2	P	No. of common appearance	% of all the appearances of S#1	% of all the appearances of S#2
Impetuous	&	aggressive	0.22	8	47.1%	14.5%
Cunning/tricky	&	old/tuned vehicles	0.11	7	10.3%	30.4%
Poor	&	inappropriate (outdated, tasteless or ripped) clothes	0.14	7	30.4%	13.5%
Impetuous	&	tough	0.13	6	35.3%	9.5%
Poor	&	old/tuned vehicles	0.18	5	21.7%	21.7%
Aggressive	&	religious	0.21	5	9.1%	62.5%

Source: Compiled by the author.

There were also correlations between the other dimensions; e.g. stereotypes and main characters (10+ of total appearances):

Table 9: Stereotypes and main characters

Stereotype	Characters	No. of common appearance	% of the appearances of stereotypes	% of the character's appearances
Aggressive	Countryballs	15	27.30%	60%
Pretty women	Pretty women	10	90.90%	71.40%
Inappropriate (outdated, tasteless or ripped) clothes	Babushkas	10	19.20%	47.60%
	OJG-Babushka	6	11.50%	60%
Family-oriented	Babushkas	6	27.30%	33%
Barbarian	Countryballs	5	13.90%	25%
Glutton	Babushkas	5	5.10%	23.80%
	OJG-Babushka	5	5.10%	50%
	Living animals	4	4%	28.60%
Tough	Living animals	5	7.90%	35.70%

Source: Compiled by the author.

These are worth examining from the characters' viewpoint. E.g. *countryballs* were connected to *aggressivity* (15 occurrences, 60% of *countryballs,* 27.3% of appearance of aggressive stereotype), to *barbarism* (5 occurrences, 25%/13.9%), *babushkas* to *family-orientation* (6 occurrences, 33%/27.3%), to *gluttony* (5 occurrences, 23.8%/5.1%), *inappropriate clothes* (10 occurrences, 47.6%/19.2%), *pretty women* (10 occurrences,

71.4%/90.9%), *living animals* to *toughness* (5 occurrences, 35.7%/7.9%), *gluttony* (4 occurrences, 28.6%/4%), *Orange Jacket Guy (OJG) Babushka Version* to *gluttony* (5 occurrences, 50%/5.1%) and *inappropriate clothes* (6 occurrences, 60%/11.5%).

Stereotypes and actions/behaviours/habits had more complex interrelations:

Table 10: Relations of stereotypes and popular elements

Stereotype	Actions/behaviours/ habits	No. of common appearance	% of all the appearances of stereotypes	% of all the appearances of actions
Glutton	Meats	54	54.50%	94.70%
	National dishes	42	42.40%	84%
	Alcohol	10	10.10%	23.80%
	To be a "true" Balkanic	7	7.10%	58.30%
	Botchery	5	5.10%	9.40%
Carnivorous	Meats	57	100%	100%
	Grilled food/grilling	17	29.80%	70.80%
	National dishes	15	26.30%	30%
	Alcohol	7	12.30%	16.70%
	Botchery	5	8.80%	9.40%
Cunning/tricky	Botchery	34	50%	64.20%
	Alcohol	8	11.80%	19%
	National dishes	6	8.80%	12%
	Retro/tasteless/ outdated clothes	6	8.80%	0.25%
	Panel houses	5	7.40%	33.30%
	Meats	5	7.40%	8.80%
Heavy drinker	Alcohol	35	68.60%	83.30%
	Meat	8	15.70%	15.10%
	Botchery	7	13.70%	13.20%
	Die hard	5	9.80%	31.30%
	Retro/tasteless/ outdated clothes	5	9.80%	20.80%
Inappropriate clothes	Retro/tasteless/ outdated clothes	16	30.80%	66.70%
	Folk clothes	9	17.30%	75%
	Crocheted textiles	9	17.30%	75%
	"Adidas"	8	15.40%	72.70%
	Alcohol	6	11.50%	14.30%
	Botchery	5	9.60%	9.40%
	Meat	5	9.50%	8.80%

Bad infrastructure	Botchery	16	40%	30.20%
	Panel houses	14	35%	93.30%
	Poor rural landscape	7	15.70%	70%
	Die hard	4	10%	25%
	Alcohol	4	10%	9.50%
Aggressive	International tensions in the Balkans	42	76.40%	59.20%
Tough	International tensions in the Balkans	14	22.20%	19.70%
	Alcohol	11	17.50%	26.20%
	Die hard	7	11.10%	43.80%
	Botchery	5	7.90%	9.40%
Old/tuned vehicle	Botchery	10	43.50%	18.90%
	Special vehicles	8	34.80%	80%
	Western car brand	7	40.50%	41.20%
	Die hard	4	17.40%	25%

Source: Compiled by the author.

Table 11: Stereotypes and genres
Stereotypes and genres too:

Stereotype	Genres	No. of common appearance	% of all the appearances of stereotypes	% of all the appearances of genres
Glutton	photo	42	42.40%	27.5%
	stacked stills	35	35.40%	21.2%
	shops	9	9.10%	26.5%
	annotated stills	7	7.10%	13.5%
Cunning/tricky	photo	36	52.90%	23.5%
	stacked stills	14	20.60%	8.5%
	annotated stills	5	7.40%	9.6%
	macro	5	7.40%	23.8%
Tough	stacked stills	22	34.90%	13.3%
	photo	16	25.40%	10.5%
	shops	8	12.70%	23.5%

Stereotype	Genres	No. of common appearance	% of all the appearances of stereotypes	% of all the appearances of genres
Carnivorous	stacked stills	23	40.40%	13.9%
	photo	26	45.60%	17.0%
Aggressive	stacked stills	23	41.80%	13.9%
	graphs	8	14.50%	32%
	drawing	5	9.10%	50%
Inappropriate (outdated, tasteless or ripped) clothes	stacked stills	20	38.50%	12.1%
	photo	18	34.60%	11.8%
	annotated stills	7	13.50%	13.5%
	shops	6	11.50%	17.6%
Heavy drinker	stacked stills	19	37.30%	11.5%
	photo	12	23.50%	7.8%
	annotated stills	6	11.80%	11.5%
Bad infrastructure	photo	22	55.00%	14.4%
	stacked stills	9	22.50%	5.5%
	shops	5	12.50%	14.7%
Barbarian	shops	7	19.40%	20.6%
	stacked stills	11	30.60%	6.7%
	photo	12	33.30%	7.8%
Poor	stacked stills	7	30.40%	4.2%
	photo	6	26.10%	3.9%
	annotated stills	6	26.10%	11.5%
Old/tuned vehicle	photo	13	56.50%	8.5%
Family-oriented	photo	8	36.40%	5.2%
Macho	stacked stills	10	47.60%	6.1%
	photo	9	42.90%	5.9%
Criminal	stacked stills	10	52.60%	6.1%

Stereotype	Genres	No. of common appearance	% of all the appearances of stereotypes	% of all the appearances of genres
Dumb	stacked stills	6	31.60%	3.6%
Impetuous	stacked stills	8	47%	4.8%
Pretty women	stacked stills	5	45.50%	3.0%
Religious	stacked stills	5	62.50%	3.0%

Source: Compiled by the author.

Table 12: Stereotypes and textual parts

Stereotype	"Language difference makers"	No. of common appearance	% of all the appearances of stereotypes	% of all the appearances of LDMs
Glutton	(insider) knowledge	7	7.07%	35.0%
	presentation ("look how things are going here")	6	6.06%	28.6%
Cunning/tricky	meaning: "here is a normal thing" (despising, "no comment")	5	7.35%	15.2%
	presentation ("look, how things are going here")	5	7.35%	23.8%
Tough	meaning: "here is a normal thing" (despising, "no comment")	6	9.52%	18.2%
	comparison	5	7.94%	25.0%
Aggressive	comparison	6	10.91%	30.0%
Inappropriate (outdated, tasteless or ripped) clothes	meaning: "here is a normal thing" (despising, "no comment")	5	9.62%	15.2%
Bad infrastructure	meaning: "here is a normal thing" (despising, "no comment")	5	12.50%	15.2%
Barbarian	meaning: "here is a normal thing" (despising, "no comment")	5	13.89%	15.2%

Source: Compiled by the author.

Stereotypes and attitude of sharers:

Table 13: Attitudes and the most popular stereotypes

Stereotype	Agreeing straightforward		Denying/challenging ironic		Agreeing ironic		Denying/challenging straightforward	
	No. of appearance	Share comp. to the average	No. of appearance	Share comp. to the average	No. of appearance	Share comp. to the average	No. of appearance	Share comp. to the average
Glutton	72	0.93	20	1.42	5	1.18	2	0.71
Cunning/tricky	45	0.84	18	1.86	4	1.38	1	0.52
Tough	45	0.91	13	1.45	4	1.49	1	0.56
Carnivorous	41	0.92	11	1.36	4	1.64	1	0.62
Aggressive	46	1.07	7	0.89	1	0.43	1	0.64
Inappropriate (…) clothes	38	0.93	9	1.22	4	1.80	1	0.68
Heavy drinker	42	1.05	6	0.83	3	1.38	0	–
Bad infrastructure	24	0.76	13	2.28	3	1.76	0	–
Barbarian	25	0.89	8	1.56	2	1.30	1	0.98
Poor	19	1.05	4	1.22	0	–	0	–
Old/tuned vehicle	12	0.67	10	3.06	1	1.02	0	–
Family-oriented	19	1.10	1	0.32	2	2.13	0	–
Macho	16	0.97	5	1.67	0	–	0	–
Criminal	17	1.14	1	0.37	1	1.23	0	–
Dumb	15	1.01	1	0.37	3	3.70	0	–
Impetuous	13	0.97	3	1.24	1	1.38	0	–
Pretty women	8	0.93	2	1.28	1	2.13	0	–
Religious	6	0.96	0	–	1	2.93	1	4.39
Lazy	6	1.27	0	–	0	–	0	–
Hairy	4	0.85	1	1.17	1	3.90	0	–
Heavy smoker	4	0.85	2	2.34	0	–	0	–
Hospitable	4	1.02	1	1.41	0	–	0	–

Source: Compiled by the author.

and a measure was conveyed on those *attitudes,* who marked their relations to the Balkans.

Table 14: Attitudes of those who are explicitly involved in the Balkans

	Attitude	No. of appearances	% of memes*	Compared to the whole sample
Agreeing	agreeing straightforward	43	76.79%	0.98
	denying/challenging ironic	5	8.93%	0.63
Denying/ challenging	agreeing ironic	4	7.14%	1.66
	denying/challenging straight-forward	4	7.14%	2.55

Source: Compiled by the author.

Recipients

Finally, there are the findings regarding the recipients' preferences (Q3): the share of the dimensions of the total 290,893 likes, and their rates.

Table 15: Audience feedback

	Element	No. of likes	Likes compared to the average
Stereotypes	Glutton	84,321	1.44
	Carnivorous	69,769	2.07
	Tough	39,219	1.06
	Inappropriate (outdated, tasteless or ripped) clothes	38,946	1.27
	Heavy drinker	35,677	1.19
	Aggressive	26,779	0.83
	Cunning/tricky	22,482	0.56
	Barbarian	16,781	0.79
	Poor	16,258	1.20
	Old/tuned vehicle	16,096	1.19
	Family-oriented	15,469	1.19
	Bad infrastructure	8,798	0.37
	Hospitable	8,679	2.94
	Criminal	8,059	0.72
	Pretty women	4,772	0.74
	Dumb	4,704	0.42
	Macho	3,035	0.24
	Heavy smoker	2,108	0.60
	Impetuous	1,587	0.16
	Lazy	980	0.28
	Religious	660	0.14
	Hairy	446	0.13

	Element	No. of likes	Likes compared to the average
Characters	Countryballs	9,918	0.67
	Babushkas	6,316	0.51
	(Pretty) women	7,695	0.93
	Living animals in meaningful roles	10,543	1.28
	Orange Jacket Guy babushka version	15,756	2.67
	Balkan politicians	7,695	1.63
	Daddies	862	0.18
	Orange Jacket Guy	676	0.14
	Gopniks	213	0.09
	Tom	221	0.09
	Peter park	208	0.09
	Simpsons	842	0.36
	Nat from Sponge Bob	3,272	1.39
	E.T.	1,052	0.45
	"Increasing"	612	0.35
	Monkey puppet	4,523	2.56
	"Baby Yoda"	93	0.05
	Matthew McConaughey	8,581	4.85
	Gangsters	122	0.10
	"Starter pack"	671	0.57
	Duct-tape guy	6,858	5.81
	Futurama character	670	0.57

Source: Compiled by the author.

Discussion

The findings revealed some well-identified patterns regarding *stereotypes, characters* and other dimensions and also how they interrelate.

The most common stereotypes describe the basic features of the Balkan meme family; and the answer to Q1 was therefore clear: the leading stereotype-categories were not the malicious ones: *decadent* stereotypes play the most important role. The first and fourth most common ones (*glutton* and *carnivorous*) belong to that; as stereotype category, *decadence* won with 213 appearances; so-called neutral ones are the second (183 appearances), *cunning/tricky* and *tough* were remarkable. *Bad nature* category was only the third, with slightly less appearances (116), however, e.g. *aggressive* was amongst the top ones. Results of the commonly underdeveloped economics (86) are visible in the *bad infrastructure* (40 apps), *poverty* and *old/tuned vehicles* follows it. Obviously positive stereotypes underperformed with only 38 appearances – and, as we will see, the most popular one, *family-oriented* was attached sometimes to a not so positive practice: about one-third of them (8) were connected to the behaviour of *parental abuse*. So, all in all, we can say that

the majority of the Balkan stereotypes appeared were neither the most malicious nor the most positive. They show Balkan people as having self-destructive behaviours like drinking, smoking, eating too much (especially meat) that make them more dangerous to themselves than to others, although, they are *tough* people, *aggressive,* etc. but are also a product of their circumstances, e.g. *poverty* or *bad infrastructure.*

There was also a clear pattern of correlations between the stereotypes themselves. The leading correlation did not need a detailed explanation – glutton and carnivorous, almost all the memes that represented the latter correlated with the former, and *carnivorous* appeared on the majority of the memes where *glutton* showed up as well. *Impetuous* and *aggressive* had also some correlation; *aggressive* and *tough,* or *impetuous* and *tough,* or *macho* and *tough,* too – their meanings were not so far from each other, so that was to some extent an expected correlation. More notable was the relation between *poor* and *inappropriate clothes* – showing that clothing not only depended on personal choices, but also on opportunities and economic status. The correlation between *cunning/tricky* and *bad infrastructure,* or *cunning/tricky* and *old/tuned vehicles* also underlined the assumption that opportunity- and environment-related stereotypes were connected to the way of solving these challenges: being cunning or tricky. Another exciting correlation was between *aggressive* and *religious:* occurred e.g. as mocking stereotypes with the reverse humour aforementioned, or as tool as an expression of criticism.

As for Q2 and Q3: characters were not as popular as, e.g. the research of Nissenbaum et al. had suggested. With regards to the image of the Balkans, it spoke for itself that the most popular one (with appearances on 25 memes) was a ball that represented a nation, and, as we will notice, not for showing their great neighbouring skills. Female characters in the sample showed two main characteristics: a concept for the old, conservative but caring granny, the *babushka,* and another one for *pretty women.* It was remarkable – and it showed that Denisova's statement about melting global and local elements (2019: 44, 53) in memes – how the well-known *Orange Jacket Guy* meme served as a frame for babushkas. Western impacts were also visible, many of which were connected to Western popular culture as cartoon or movie figures like *Tom, E.T.* or *Peter Parker.*

The characters' correlations with stereotypes were also remarkable, and worth examining from the perspective of the characters' viewpoint. E.g. *countryballs* – representing nations – had strong connections to *aggressivity,* most of the *countryballs*-depicting memes were attached to that stereotype. *Countryballs* had a remarkable share of memes that portray *aggressivity,* and there was also a noticeable connection with *barbarism,* too. As far as the correlations were concerned, there was a strong connection between *aggressive* and *tough* to the *international tensions in the Balkans* phenomenon – which should not need any more explanation, as only a few decades have elapsed after the war. *Babushkas,* even *OJG*-ones, were connected to *family-orientation, gluttony*, and *inappropriate clothes* – housecoat-wearing *babushkas* who disciplined you as a child and made you eat more than you wanted; some prediction we could get about eating habits as living animals were connected to *toughness* and *gluttony.*

Just to summarise the main consequences of *actions/behaviours/habits,* regarding the clothing, we could see those old-fashioned clothes, and *crocheted* or *knitted textiles* accounted for up to half of the findings, so "backwardness" could be the key concept.

However, it is interesting that it was not only *inappropriate clothes* that correlated to these categories, but also *cunning/tricky* and *heavy drinker.*

As the behaviour/phenomena dimension was concerned in general, three of the first four were somehow connected to (Balkan) politics: *international tensions in the Balkans, corruption/autocracy* and *nationalism.* Adding them the rest that were in a loose connection with them (language specifics, nostalgia, telling this is a *shitty place* and *pride*) made up almost half of the category (48.3%). From the perspective of correlations, as mentioned before, the first correlated to *aggressive* and *tough.*

Another big bunch was somehow about the special acceptation of norms and rules: *botchery, die hard* (being unnecessarily brave, risking life for nothing), the expected competence on this (being a true Balkanic) and *jerk driving* made 25.6%. From the perspective of the stereotypes, *cunning/tricky* correlated many of them: *botchery,* as a solution to problems made remarkable figures with 34 common presences that meant a majority on both sides(!). Correlating with botchery was also noticeable in case of eight stereotypes of the nine highlighted (in the sense of correlations), emphasising its role in the core of Balkan stereotypes: solving problems with creative, cheap and/or even tasteless or unpretentious – but in a working – manner.

Gastronomy had also non-discrete categories, but these spoke for themselves anyway: meats, grilling, national dishes and alcoholic drinks with more than 90% of the appearances. From the point of view of the stereotypes, consumption-related correlations were also interesting. *Glutton* and *carnivorous* had some common features as meats and national dishes appeared commonly with both of them. Meanwhile, *to be a true Balkanic* correlation with *gluttony* showed that stereotype to be crucial, according to the sharers. On the other hand, *carnivorous* often meant roasting meat on an open flame. One of the solutions is *E.T.* roasting on a spit, suggesting to the recipients that Balkan people roast and eat every meat, regardless of its kind or its origins.

If you belong to us, you will understand
*(https://9gag.com/gag/a3Mro43)*

Eating everything, like a barbarian
(https://9gag.com/gag/aL8zLev)

The stereotype *heavy drinker*'s correlation with alcoholic beverages was not a surprise, as was *die hard* – unnecessary bravery was sometimes based on the consumed alcohol – and eating meat could also be connected to big (family) occasions where drinking was a common habit as well. However, from the perspective of alcohol, correlations were very diverse: *booze* appeared with the aforementioned *carnivorous,* at the stereotype of *cunning/tricky* (was the second numerous category), *inappropriate clothes, tough* and *bad infrastructure,* too.

Bad infrastructure was not as highly represented, but there was a remarkable lack of balance between poor environment and beauty, with a rate of 3 to 40. As well, as was mentioned, *botchery* – as a manner to fixing problems regarding the infrastructure – was the leading one. *Panel houses* or *poor rural landscape* was directly referred to this stereotype.

Vehicles also appeared in the sample; on first sight, *Western cars* made the overwhelming majority, but later we will notice that usually they were not "normal" cars, either, but almost half of them (7 of 17) belonged to the stereotype of *old/tuned vehicles.* And there was also a noticeable amount of *special vehicles* – this category contained extraordinarily tuned vehicles, e.g. a supermarket cart rigged up to an old motorbike or tractor attached to a cart (https://9gag.com/gag/argez6B) – that explained the correlations with *botchery,* too.

The Orange Jacket Guy (OJG)   (https://9gag.com/gag/argez6B)
(https://9gag.com/gag/azq0YBq)
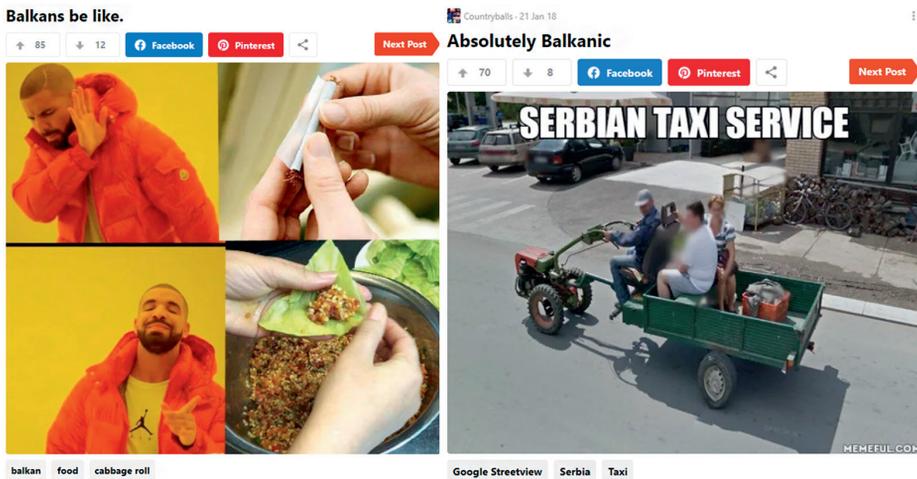
Genres were an exception in sense of discrete categories; the most striking perception was that so-called classic genres, e.g. *demotivationals* or *rage comics* were quite rare, below 1%; *image macros,* too, made up only 4.3% of the sample, however, they were truly widespread on the 9gag website. The most popular genres were *stacked stills* – *OJG, OJG-Babushka,* etc. belonged to this category as well as *countryballs.* This was also the case for photos showing some "extraordinary thing" – those two genres covered

almost two-thirds (64.5%) of the sample, and therefore made the most correlations with stereotypes. Figures showed that the aforementioned "extraordinary things" could be mostly food *(glutton), (cunning/tricky)* solution for something, huge amount of meat *(carnivorous), inappropriate clothing, old/tuned vehicle, bad infrastructure,* etc. *Stacked stills* were often composed of several photos, therefore the patterns were similar on many occasions, although sometimes (e.g. in case of *aggressivity,* which was strongly connected to *international tensions in the Balkans* and *characters of countryballs*) there were other preferences – others tended to correlate with *stacked stills,* and a few of them preferred to collate with *shops.* The relation between *drawings* and *aggressive* was also tendentious: it mostly covered maps with some political references regarding *international tensions in the Balkans* – contemporary or historical ones.

The dimension of language difference markers was quite diverse: pretending, ironically or not, that some – not common – things were common in the Balkans was the most popular category. The same was true of *presentation* (meaning: *"how things are going on here"*), *comparison* (mostly with the West) and pretending to have some *insider knowledge* (mostly on Balkan topics, knowing things that the aforementioned "implicit reader" who should be a Westerner, would not know. This coding process is especially noticeable in the *strangeness of a foreign language*). Their main points are differentiation, identifying themselves as belonging to the Balkans, and – albeit with blurred borders – playing the role of some kind of outsider who "translates" the Balkans for the "implicit reader" unifying with them in an assumed common laugh, or of a Balkan insider, who speaking through the cultural codes of natives to send a message, even if this is only "I am one of you". In terms of correlations with stereotypes, only these few made measurable figures, the *no comment* approach from texts to *bad infrastructure, barbarian, inappropriate clothes, tough, cunning/tricky,* as presenting them as part of the Balkan norms; *presentation* could join it in cases of two stereotypes (*glutton* and *cunning/tricky*), *comparison* as a common counterpart of *aggressive* and *tough,* comparing Western nations, usually with Balkan nations.

It was also interesting that the pattern of the attitudes demonstrated that an attitude of agreement with the stereotypes in question was overwhelmingly in the majority with 92.5% (compared to attitudes of challenging the stereotypes). It was also remarkable that irony had almost the same rates amongst formal agreeing or formal challenging attitudes: 82.6%. It revealed that sharers who identified themselves with marking their obvious connections with the Balkans, drew a somehow different pattern: agreeing attitude lost some 7% while denying/challenging won, and irony also doubled its rates (from 7.1% to 16.1%). The most significant difference emerged in rates of *denying/ challenging ironic* attitude that lost one third and *denying/challenging straightforward* that more than doubled its share. That could lead us to the consequence that the average sharer tended to agree more with stereotypes than with those who had some connection to the Balkans.

As we could see, the same was true for the recipients, too, in fact, much more than the affected sharers: the appearance of the *decadent* stereotype gained the highest number of likes: 1.53 times higher than the average. So-called positive stereotypes were rewarded, too, getting more likes with 1.29. All the rest were less popular,

underdeveloped economics-related stereotype appearances got 0.81, related to people's projected "bad" nature 0.719 and finally, the neutral point of view got only 0.625 times less likes than the average. It was particularly true (with more than double the like shares) for *hospitable* and *carnivorous,* moderately true (ranging from 1.44 to 1.06) for *glutton, inappropriate clothes, poor, heavy drinker, old/tuned vehicle, family-oriented* and *tough.* All the rest were below the average, the most unpopular with below 0.3 like share being *lazy, macho, impetuous, religious, hairy.* These figures might underline the assumption that those who were involved were more generous towards the Balkan concept in terms of stereotypes, softened the edge of the more negative ones, strengthened the positive ones, and also felt some pride for those who supported the image of their so called "decadent" lifestyle (and, as we could see, neutral stereotypes were not affected).

There were a lot of other correlations between visual and textual elements and the number of likes given by recipients to memes that contained those elements. As far as the characters were concerned, those memes where they appeared were basically less popular (0.94) than the average. It is meaningful from the perspective of the lingua franca's superstratum aforementioned that over the average like rate, there were almost only Western-based (meme) characters (*duct-tape guy, Matthew McConaughey,* etc.) in total, and there were only 3 exceptions: a bricolage of the *OJG* Guy (remaking with *Babushka's* character) as a third most popular one, *Balkan politicians'* character, and *living animals* (without nationality), while less popular ones also contained Western characters. An interesting phenomenon is that, too, that the most frequently used characters amongst meme sharers *(countryballs, babushkas, pretty women)* were less popular amongst recipients according to the number of their likes given to those memes that contained that characters.

*food-centrism (*https://9gag.com/gag/ayxL3py*)*

*OJG Babushka version (*https://9gag.com/gag/a9AwmzW*)*
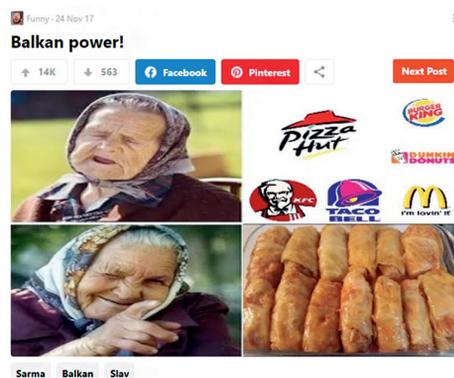
Clothing: according to the recipients, two favourite categories were the most and less numerous ones, *retro/tastelessness/outdated* clothes, and *Adidas* – folk clothes and knitted ones were less popular amongst them.

Behaviours/phenomena category was very diverse in sense of recipients' reactions: the most popular were *corruption/autocracy, sexuality, explicit expression meaning "this is a shitty place!" circumventing the rules, science* and *international tensions in the Balkans.* Meanwhile, *parental abuse* did not gain many likes (0.09), nor did *jerk driving* – probably because of personal involvements. At least, in this category, Balkan-related topics emerged and were popular as well.

Infrastructural characteristics were unpopular in general (0.444 to the average like amount), and only *bathrooms/restrooms* could reach above 1.00. Interestingly, playgrounds and *beauty of natural landscape* got less likes (0.09 and 0.05), while the most common ones *(panel houses, poor rural landscape)* were about the average.

After all the former figures, it was not striking that in the *gastronomy* category (which was generally above average), every specified element got their like-surpluses, particularly *meats* and *grilled food/grilling.* Genres also had their patterns in terms of popularity, showing some predictions regarding the older meme genres: *texts, macros* and *shops* remained popular, while *rage comics, memes IRL* and *demotivationals* were almost forgotten on the part of both sharers and recipients.

Let us take a look at *textual parts* and strong messages, as some obvious expressions cannot be ignored by the audience (figures showed that the average number of likes was 1.21 times of the average). Atypically, the most numerous *no comment* reached the third highest figure (1.49); however, it was very noticeable that the most popular one was the *resist* (textually challenging the interpreted stereotype within the meme) with more than six times more than the average. It was also interesting that a complicit wink with Balkans people did not work as communicating the *hidden, inner self* (accounting for 0.05 of the average).

Attitude was concerned with the last part of the analysis, and it truly strengthens the assumption that recipients reinforced denying/challenging attitudes twice(!) more than agreeing ones. The former could get around the average (1.03) while the latter got 2.03 times of the average. As we could see, agreeing ironically was the most popular attitude (3.25), which could easily relate to the reverse or rebellious humour mentioned in the introduction. Meanwhile, a straightforward denying/challenging attitude was the least popular (0.36), and irony seemed to be overwhelmingly more popular than straightforwardness: an ironic attitude, and humour, won.

Conclusions

Examining this sample of a convincing size, all the questions were answered. First of all, stereotypes were widespread in the sample (Q1) and appeared through well-outlined patterns of visual and textual elements (Q2). These drew the main lines: the strongest stereotypes and their markers: the forever fighting, impetuous, sometimes aggressive Balkan nations; botchery, as the cunning or even tricky (but working) solutions to everyday problems; risk-seeking behaviour, related to toughness, like "die hard"; the excessive consumption of (often grilled) meat, tobacco product and alcohol; signs of economic underdevelopment were also clear through the worn-out built environment;

outdated or tasteless clothing from the viewpoint of the Western centrum; and vehicles, represented by dilapidated, unusually modified or DIY refurbished cars.

The aforementioned signs were also supported by textual parts positioning the sharer as a wannabe Westerner but unsuccessful moderniser of their own community, or a humble interpreter of the Balkans for the implicit – Western – readers, sometimes with the clear marking of their own involvement. However, in these cases, they tended to be more generous regarding the types of stereotypes, favouring self-destructing and positive ones over negative ones. The same could be seen on recipients' reactions: they generally rewarded with more likes reverse humour against stereotypes than simple agreeing or ironically denying (i.e. agreeing) with them (Q3).

Ultimately, this research empirically confirmed the phenomenon of portraying the Balkans as a single unit, with the characteristics of individual nations shown mostly when they are involved a conflict with each other. It also demonstrated the asymmetrical relations with the Western centrum from the perspective of the semi-periphery – another nail in the coffin of the dream of democratic communication through the internet – and revealed the strategies and preferences of recipients and those involved.

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