

# **How to Shatter the Stereotypes in Western Balkan News Coverage**

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high versus low context cultures**

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# **How to Shatter the Stereotypes in Western Balkan News Coverage**

Analyzing the difficulties of reporting  
from high versus low context cultures

Author: Una Hajdari

# Introduction

The Western Balkan region continues to receive a disproportionately higher amount of news coverage in international media outlets, in comparison to the bigger and more populous Balkan countries such as Bulgaria and Romania. The violent disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s attracted significant media attention, especially from the European and the U.S. public. Globally, there is a basic familiarity or exposure to terms such as ethnic cleansing, war crimes, ethnic tensions, ultra-nationalism, and so forth, from the wars in Yugoslavia.

Furthermore, the Western Balkan region has been subject to influences from external democratic and authoritarian powers. For years, the European Union (EU) has been pushing for a closer relationship with the region. Russia has been involved in meddling in several Western Balkan countries, whereas China has focused predominantly on business and economic deals to exert its influence. Countries such as Turkey or the Gulf states have also been involved, financially and otherwise, in several Balkan countries.

The coverage of the Western Balkans through the lens of conflict and war perpetuates and highlights the dysfunction and divisions that exist in this part of the world. Yet, to properly understand the deficiencies in the news coverage of the Western Balkans, it could be helpful to apply the principles of low versus high context cultures<sup>1</sup> – a perspective widely used in psychology, business, marketing and journalism.

In brief, high versus low-context analysis divides countries into the low context group on one hand, which means that an uninitiated reader (or traveler, since the analysis is applied to people who spend limited time in a region, such as foreign journalists) does not need an extensive period of introduction or adaptation to understand the basic customs, history and mannerisms of this country. The best example is the United States,<sup>2</sup> a country that through its pop culture and political influence maintains a global level of recognition and familiarity. A high-context culture refers to a country or region that is the opposite of a low-context culture, and analyzing it comes with a long adaptation curve.

When applied to journalism, this means that international journalists need to consider entry points or levels of understanding when covering the Western Balkans or any other high-context culture.

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1 Jennifer E. Beer, "[Communicating Across Cultures: High and Low Context](#)," Culture at Work, July 2003.

2 ULG's Language Solutions, "[Communicating in High Context vs. Low Context Cultures](#)," United Language Group, Archived on August 2020.

When writing about these countries, journalists need to also consider ways to initiate the reader and provide a gateway into understanding the culture. The way the political, societal, economic and environmental issues in the Western Balkans are reported on by international and English-language outlets inherently affects how the global public perceives the region. It also affects the way local geopolitical issues are approached, be it by stakeholders in Brussels or in the United States.

Therefore, it is important to isolate the patterns of flawed reporting on the Western Balkans by international media outlets, explain the sources of it and why certain flaws are specific to the region. This paper will provide these examples through cross-pollination with established practices from cultural studies, specifically the study of contexts in culture.

Psychologists<sup>3</sup> have studied the differences in the way high-context versus low-context cultures need to be approached by foreigners visiting or interacting with these cultures for the first time in order to prevent prejudices or faulty conclusions. They classify most countries or cultures as either high or low context (or higher or lower context). The most basic definition of low-context cultures within the field of intercultural relations within psychology is that they do not require extensive introduction (or context) to understand a specific country or culture.

Thorough and novel analysis of the methods of journalism and its implications are rare, for the following reasons: journalism enjoys extraordinarily high protections<sup>4</sup> when it comes to independence and freedom of expression, which limits the ways it can be checked or amended.

Governments, non-governmental organizations, and others can offer their criticism of the way in which journalism is conducted or a topic is covered, but there are no laws or bodies that can punish a journalist for spreading disinformation, prejudices, misleading the public or simply doing bad reporting in democratic societies. The only exception is slander or libel,<sup>5</sup> which is punishable by law, and while there have been cases of large publications having to issue apologies and pay fines – the legal category of defamation applies to all individuals acting in the public arena, not just journalists.

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3 James W. Neuliep, "[Intercultural Communication, Fifth Edition](#)," Sage Publications, November 2015.

4 The Electoral Knowledge Project, "[Media and Elections](#)," Ace Project, January 2003.

5 Andrew T. Kenyon, "[Libel and Defamation in Journalism](#)," Oxford Research Encyclopedia, May 2019.

# 1. International Reporting and the Western Balkans

English remains the uncontested and universally accepted lingua franca of journalism and international news. Tanya Pampalone, in an article for the website of the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN), highlights the trope many in journalism are well aware of – news is not global news until it is covered in English.<sup>6</sup>

In the Western Balkans, this fact is deeply ingrained in the way the importance of a news development is perceived. A local journalist can spend months investigating a story, placing their life at risk and on top of that receive a low salary to compensate for their trouble. While no thorough analysis or precise data has been collected on how international reporting affects perceptions in the Western Balkans, a keyword search<sup>7</sup> for the main Europe-focused outlets such as The Guardian or the New York Times brings back around 100 hits per month in the region.

As highlighted in Pampalone's article for GIJN, the public seeks validation for the importance of their country and developments in it when a foreign journalist or outlet decides to write about them. The perception is that if a Western outlet writes about a certain event, then the event must be important.

## 1.1 Low Versus High Context Cultures in the Balkans

American cross-cultural psychologist Edward T. Hall is famous in cultural studies for his theory on communications between low and high context cultures. The simplified version of his theory is that in low context cultures, interlocutors can be direct and their spoken interactions do not include too many unspoken cues that are imperceptible to the newcomer.

The opposite is seen in a high context culture. An oft-cited example for those who study Hall is his comparison between the way an average American communicates – the exact meaning of what they want to say is presented in the most direct and unfiltered form. The opposite example that is often cited is speaking to someone from Japan, where communication is embedded with many layers of cultural context that the uninitiated observer will most likely miss or misinterpret.

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<sup>6</sup> Tanya Pampalone, "[Watch Your Language: How English is Skewing the Global News Narrative](#)," Global Investigative Journalism Network, September 2019.

<sup>7</sup> [Google Trends Search](#), November 2022.

Applied to international reporting in the Balkans, this analysis highlights how and why many unspoken cues, ingrained beliefs or cultural and local contexts and other complexities are lost on the international reporter or audience.

It is no coincidence that low-context societies are part of what is collectively referred to as the West in popular culture. Western media is overwhelmingly anglophone, it writes from a perspective that is familiar to people either through popular culture or as a result of geopolitical dominance. This is because international reporting is inherently an expensive endeavor.<sup>8</sup> It continues to be something only outlets with a strong financial backing, whether commercial or public, can afford. Additionally, the first major strides in international news reporting were made by journalists from the United Kingdom, and later the United States. Since the intention of these outlets was to bring foreign cultures to local audiences, simplifications were common.

These simplifications include associating a country or region with its most identifiable characteristic. The most well-known fact about the Western Balkans is that it was affected by a series of bloody conflicts at the end of the 20th century. As such, this is how most of the reporting on the region is shaped.

Post-war societies are almost always high-context cultures.<sup>9</sup> The complexities of the causes, events and consequences of the wars that took place in the wake of the disintegration of Yugoslavia largely eluded even the most well-intentioned journalists covering the wars as they happened, and the post-war complexities continue to elude them to this day.

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8 Willaim F. Woo, "[Reporting International News in a Serious Way](#)," Nieman Reports, December 2001.

9 James W. Neuliep, "[Intercultural Communication, Fifth Edition](#)," Sage Publications, November 2015.

## 2. Defining the High Context Situations in the Balkans

### 2.1 Speed and Exposure

A major element of Hall's insistence on the difference between high and low context cultures is the speed at which communication and results are achieved. In journalism, this could be interpreted as the speed with which a foreign journalist understands the problem or news development at hand, and the speed with which they are able to present their level of comprehension to a wider audience.

In the Western Balkans, relationships between individuals, institutions or political representatives depend on trust and are built up slowly,<sup>10</sup> and there is a strong distinction between someone who is considered on the inside versus the outside of one's circle of trust or beliefs. This indicates a slow or prolonged adaptation period.

For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, many international media analysts often point to the heavily ethnicized political system, established through the peace agreement known as the Dayton Accords<sup>11</sup> signed by representatives of the three ethnic groups in 1995. The agreement, which was primarily intended to placate the main belligerents in the war, produced a complicated political system divided along ethnic lines, which to this day, continues to be the source of extreme political dysfunction and widespread nationalist rhetoric.

All of Bosnia's governing bodies require one representative from each ethnic group (Bosniak, Croat, Serb) – there is the element of trust that plays a large role in who they will continue to vote for. Any time so-called non-ethnic parties have been formed and tried to break the pattern of voting in any given election, they have failed to achieve significant results<sup>12</sup> not because their platform was not convincing enough, but because voters were unsure whether they would be able to defend their interests – and in some case, their survival – in the long run.

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10 Government at a Glance: Western Balkans, "[9.1 Trust in Government](#)," OECD, January 2021.

11 United Nations Treaty Collection, "[The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)," United Nations, November 1995.

12 Nat Perry, "[Elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina were competitive but concerns remained over failed reforms and divisive rhetoric, international observers say](#)," OSCE Press Agency, October 2022.



The Bosnian voter firmly believes that they do not enjoy the privileges and secure lifestyle a Western voter enjoys – i.e. the relative knowledge that basic services will not be taken away from him or her based on their ethnic background – and knows that with each election, existential issues tied to their well-being and survival are at stake.

However, this insider understanding of the layers of complexity that shape voter behavior in Bosnia is something that requires prolonged exposure to the country. The voters themselves might not be aware that their behavior is conditioned by all these elements, so even if the foreign reporter were to ask them directly, they would not get a direct response. A reporter's job is to take the quotes they get from officials, average people and analysts and sandwich them between context and background — it is considered irresponsible or incomplete reporting if they just relay them all directly or without critical consideration.

A similar phenomenon can be analyzed in Kosovo. Many analysts were quick to assume that Kosovar voters have more flexible preferences, and that democratic turnover is alive and well in the country due to the fact the Levizja Vetevendosje (the Self-Determination Movement) managed to push out all the so-called establishment parties to win a landmark majority in the 2021 elections.<sup>13</sup>

While Kosovo is definitely a positive example in some respects, analysts disregard the fact that the Self-Determination Movement is one of the longest and most persistent political movements in the entire region. Not a single political movement in any Western Balkan country has existed for that long or worked that hard to maintain relevance in the public domain through protests, rallies and publicity stunts.<sup>14</sup>

As such, while a headline along the lines of “Longtime Protester-Turned-Party-Leader Becomes Prime Minister” is less appealing than “Surprise Results in Kosovo Election Push Out Establishment Parties,” this is, inherently, misleading. Therefore, foreign reporters who have limited exposure to the Western Balkans are likely to lead a story with incorrect conclusions or frame it in a way that misses the gist of the news development.

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13 Deutsche Welle, [“Kosovo leftist Kurti declares election victory”](#) Deutsche Welle Online, February 2021.

14 Bujar Aruqaj, [“Kosovo’s Vetevendosje Keep Faith in Graffiti”](#) Balkan Insight, May 2012.

### 3. Group Identities as Pitfalls for Western Confusion Over the Western Balkans

Group identity is another aspect that either confounds or misleads the international reporter covering the Western Balkans. While some form of group identity is just as equally present in Western societies, Hall argues that the prime source of identity in the West is rooted in oneself and one's accomplishments.

In the Western Balkans, just like in any high-context society, ethnic and national identity are the main drivers of belonging<sup>15</sup> and, in many cases, beliefs and actions undertaken by individuals. Along with national identity comes communal identity (family identity and hyperlocalized identity tied to a city or region). People choose to have their identity rooted in groups, and this is heavily expressed in one's decision-making.<sup>16</sup>

A strong example of group identity being misconstrued in reporting on the Balkans can be found in the case of developments in Montenegro over the past three years.<sup>17</sup> President Milo Djukanovic announced in late 2019 that he planned on reforming the law on church property in the country, which would strip the Serbian Orthodox Church of its monopoly on both religious and non-religious ownership in various parts of the country.<sup>18</sup>

Now, when articles covering religion were compiled in Kosovo, Western reporting would reduce the conflict in the 1990s and escalations that occurred after it to a "fight between Christians and Muslims."<sup>19</sup> In Montenegro, the differences did not seem as straightforward as they did in Kosovo, because the overwhelming majority are nominal Christians – and belong to Eastern Orthodoxy – on both sides. This was not an accurate depiction. Although Montenegrins and Serbs are very similar in terms of culture and traditions, the communities are currently deeply divided.

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15 Branislav Radeljic, "[Identity in the Balkans: assessing the politics of nationalization and Europeanization](#)," *European Politics and Society*, September 2017.

16 Sven Milekic, "[Croatian Pupils Voice Mixed Views on 'Balkan' Identity](#)" *Balkan Insight*, January 2018.

17 Aleksandar Brezar, "[Why it's not just religion inflaming tensions between Serbia and Montenegro](#)," *Euronews*, September 2021.

18 Srdjan Jankovic, "[Novi zakon o crkvama cilja crkvenu imovinu u Crnoj gori](#)," *Radio Free Europe*, May 2019.

19 Igor Ispanovic, "[French Connection: 'Humanitarian' Far-Right Claims Kosovo as a Cautionary Tale](#)," *Balkan Insight*, February 2022.

Yet the coverage of the elections in August 2020 was either “A Big Win for Democracy in Montenegro as Djukanovic is Toppled,” which also ignored the caveat that his party actually placed first, or “Nationalists and Pro-Russian Parties Win in NATO-Member Montenegro.” Both are, in some ways, wrong.<sup>20</sup>

Many reporters were completely boggled by the fact that a country could be a NATO member, an EU contender, and still have an undefined modern identity. Here, the Western perceptions about how a country’s identity is shaped were transferred onto Montenegro, which resulted in continuously misplaced and sometimes outright false reporting. Coverage of Montenegro was limited for years precisely because it was seen as a relatively stable Western Balkan country, when in fact these tensions and divisions were simmering under the surface until they erupted in 2019.

The main mistake made, however, was believing that even a superficial understanding of how group identity works in other parts of the Western Balkans readily translates into a basic comprehension of the differences distinguishing the two groups at loggerheads in Montenegro.

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<sup>20</sup> Vladimir Utjesinovic, “[Montenegro elections: Who are the triumphant opposition factions and what do they stand for](#),” Euronews, September 2022.

## 4. Misconstrued or Misunderstood History in Reporting on the Western Balkans

The most significant determinant of the high-context nature of the Western Balkans is its modern history.<sup>21</sup> The layers of complexity, owing to its specific geographic position and continuous instability and wars, have rendered it difficult both for journalists who are newcomers as well as those who have extensive experience in covering it.

It is important to distinguish history from group identity, because, as the previous section highlights, modern identities can be shaped by modern events – such as Montenegro’s declaration of independence in 2006 – more than historical events. Bosniaks too, as cited in the Bosnia example, saw their identity flourish to a higher extent after the wars of the 1990s than they did in the past. While history and group identity are interlinked, history involves a recollection of the past while group identity involves a choice made in the present.

Here it helps to compare the level of basic historical understanding required to report on a story in North Macedonia, for example. North Macedonia has faced numerous challenges in its EU integration and a large number of them require a deep understanding of several historical moments in both Balkan and wider European history.

Take the name issue with Greece. In order to be able to adequately cover the subject, the journalist has to be aware of Greece’s role in the Balkans going back to the Hellenistic period, Byzantine Empire, its relationship toward minorities, the Slavic migrations in the Balkans, the non-linear development of Slavic sub-identities in the region, First and Second Balkan Wars, and the very nature of state-building – or the principle that states and nations are not natural but rather artificial creations, and that one state’s supremacy over the other is not a result of a regulated process.

All of this makes for a fascinating story – and the attention-grabbing complexities are what continue to draw reporters to the region – but they also make any thorough news article on the topic a Herculean feat even for specialized academics, let alone journalists who are flown in to produce a comprehensive piece within a few days.

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<sup>21</sup> David Binder, “[Why the Balkans?](#)” The Wilson Center, March 2000.

Even when Greece and Macedonia resolved a 27-year-long name dispute at Prespa, and to this day, people struggle to understand the specifics of the Prespa Agreement. How can a country be named North Macedonia, but the people be called Macedonians? If Greece does not mind the people being called Macedonians, why can the country not be called that, too? Are the Macedonians in Greece the same as the Macedonians in North Macedonia?

In addition to the name issue, North Macedonia has an ongoing language issue with Bulgaria. To understand that issue, you have to understand the difference between the ways in which Eastern and Southern Slavic languages were developed, the anti-fascist movement in North Macedonia during World War II (and the Bulgarian Nazi puppet government), the policies Yugoslavia applied to nations and nationalities, and so forth.<sup>22</sup>

The inept way in which EU institutions – whose gilded halls are presumably full of specialized experts and analysts – handled the Bulgarian veto issue speaks precisely about the difficulties of permeating the discourse in high-context societies. If EU officials cannot make head or tails of the issue, what can we expect from an unassuming reporter who also covers a handful of other countries?

In the Western Balkan region, both a nation's and an individual's self-worth is closely tied to their history. Their worth as a civilization is tied to the unique set of traditions, historic events and legacies that define them today. Language, in particular, is a key part of the historical identity of a nation or ethnic group – as witnessed in the example of North Macedonia, an overwhelmingly pro-European country where the population was willing to risk their EU membership just so their language was not reduced to a dialect of Bulgarian.

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<sup>22</sup> Aleksandar Brezar, "[Could North Macedonia be the graveyard of the EU's ideals?](#)" Euronews, July 2021.

## 5. The Type of Reporters Drawn to the Balkans

Having laid out the challenges of covering the Western Balkans for international media outlets, it is helpful to discern the prototypical stories that draw foreign reporters to the region. By aggregating the main topics that produced coverage from the region, very clear general categories or areas of focus emerge.

**“The Balkans as Russia’s/China’s Backyard”:** While there are legitimate concerns about malign influence and meddling from China and Russia, this type of reporter will find evidence of involvement from the governments or intelligence services at every corner. “Republika Srpska uses Cyrillic, therefore it is influenced by Russia!”<sup>23</sup> or “The Serbian flag is an upside-down Russian flag!” to name the worst offenders. These reporters seem uninterested in understanding why these two global powers are interested in the Balkans to begin with, and miss the opportunity to write in-depth stories about a region that has always had consistent influence from the East and the West.

It is undeniable that there is a sufficient supply of geopolitically-themed stories to report on in the Western Balkans – after all, this is the main legacy of the wars in the 1990s.<sup>24</sup> Even though, international involvement is much lower than it was in the immediate aftermath of the wars, it is still a region that the U.S., the EU and NATO have a vested interest in, and that interest also draws in malign actors such as China and Russia, and in some cases Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Hungary, and others.

**“Western White Savior”:** The population of the Western Balkans is part of the European Caucasian white race, for all intents and purposes, but in the unofficial European pecking order, Slavic nations and other ethnic groups that had socialist governments are seen as slightly more second class than their Western counterparts. In the wake of the Cold War and the wide-armed embrace of the West that followed, a trend emerged in international reporting in Eastern Europe where the assumption was that everything needed to be replaced by the Western way of life or thinking.<sup>25</sup> While many countries were happy to accept directions from the West, when they did not magically turn into an equally developed and flourishing Western country, discontent spread.

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<sup>23</sup> Tom Kington, [“Bosnian peace deal at risk from leader stoking Serb anger.”](#) The Times, February 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Stefan Lehne, [“Geopolitics, the EU and the Western Balkans.”](#) Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis – Skopje, October 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Grievson, Vladimir Gligorov, Peter Havlik, Gabor Hunya, Olga Pindyuk, Leon Podkaminer, Sandor Richter, Hermine Vidovic, [“Central and Eastern Europe 30 Years After the Fall of the Berlin Wall.”](#) The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, November 2019.

Poland is a notable example, being one of the most pro-American countries in Europe apart from the Balkan countries.<sup>26</sup> The disappointment that continues to be widespread in Poland has led to the country turning into a center of right-wing populist ideology, and the main reason many average citizens will cite is that they did not get the country they were promised after the Cold War.<sup>27</sup>

A sub-facet of the imposed Western narratives is including elements in the stories that mock any way of life that is different from the U.S. or a Western European country. Foreign reporters like to emphasize when someone is smoking, drinking, when they have bad teeth, when their clothes are too garish or over-the-top, which goes against the main postulations of journalism – respect your interlocutors and respect their beliefs.<sup>28</sup>

Not every story about Bosnia, Kosovo or Albania needs to start with a reference to the Muslim call to prayer,<sup>29</sup> or mention the number of women seen wearing headscarves. Crumbling facades or roads are just as present in rural parts of the U.S. – or even in big cities – as they are in Eastern Europe, and so are corrupt politicians. Approaching your subjects with a superiority complex amounts to doing a disfavor to your profession, outlet and the country you are covering.

**“Crisis Parachute Journalists”:** This type of journalist is the one who flies in when there is an increase in tensions in Kosovo, a new crisis in Bosnia, or a new pro-Russian event in Belgrade.<sup>30</sup> The journalist often comes with a pre-constructed notion or conclusion about what is going on, with predetermined questions and predetermined responses.

The cutthroat nature of the journalism profession often imposes an approach where stories are only stories if there is an actual crisis. Many journalists wrongly interpret this as a need to turn every story into a life-or-death report about countries being at the cusp of war. A relevant example is the flareup on the border between Kosovo and Serbia in late July, as a result of license plates issued by Serbia for municipalities in neighboring Kosovo being banned by the government in Prishtina.

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26 Meridian International Center, Gallup, [“The U.S.-Global Leadership Project.”](#) Gallup, December 2015.

27 Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, [“How liberalism became ‘the god that failed’ in eastern Europe.”](#) The Guardian, October 2019.

28 Andrew Higgins, [“How to Unite a Deeply Divided Kosovo? Name a Lake After Trump.”](#) The New York Times, February 2021.

29 Agence France Presse, [“In fractured Bosnia, Croast call for change.”](#) France 24, March 2022.

30 Ayman Oghanna, [“In Northern Kosovo, Tensions Threaten to Boil Over.”](#) Foreign Policy, October 2022.

# Conclusion

In order to provide an all-encompassing study of the flaws of international reporting in the Western Balkans, or any high-context society, years of systematic analysis as well as thorough surveys involving local receptions of international news in the participating countries would be required. This paper aims to provide a basic insight into the flaws documented so far and provide a starting point for conversations on this issue. The conclusions it draws are that international reporting in the Western Balkans fails to sufficiently elaborate on the complexities of the region, while also arguing that complexity alone can not be an excuse for subpar reporting.

By categorizing and defining the flaws, it provides foreign reporters venturing into coverage of the region a shortlist of mistakes they should avoid. It also aims to inform the public about the shortcomings of the way their region is covered, as means to allow them to push back more efficiently against reporting that is misleading or falls short of basic journalistic standards.



