



## Rediscovering Europe and national Cuisine. How EU integration is shaping food tastes in Sofia and Belgrade in the 21st century



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### ABSTRACT

This article researches the Europeanisation of the restaurant scenes in Sofia and Belgrade, capitals of an actual EU member-state and an aspiring one. By comparing the representations of foreign cuisines in aspects such as presumed depth and breadth of customers' knowledge, incorporation of culinary terms, use of authentic ingredients and presence of native chefs, the research establishes similarities between tastes and lifestyle aspirations in the two cities, but also differences in their realisation. This comparison outlines the structural advantages provided by EU membership with its facilitation of the movement of goods and people.

Considering the researched material within the debate over European integration endangering local identities, the article contradicts such claims and demonstrates how the influx of foreign cuisines creates pressures to modernize and reassert national cuisines, integrating them within their culinary region.

### Scene 1

Cinecittà is an Italian restaurant in Sofia. Opened in 2012, it is run by a Bulgarian-speaking Italian. As the name suggests, it is situated near the “Cinema Centre” - the former communist state studios in the outskirts of the city where in the last 12 years over 300 international films have been produced, including *Conan the Barbarian* and *The Black Dalia*.

Its menu also has a cinematic quality and reads as if it were taken out of mouths of world-renowned chefs such as those featured in the documentary *Chef's Table*: “Velouté of Hokkaido pumpkin with porcini and truffles”; “Chocolate ravioli with *confit de canard* and *foie gras* with pesto made from pistachios and cream of chestnut”, “Succulent Iberico pork, cooked for 24 h at a low temperature of 63°, with caramelized shallots and pureed Borlotti beans”. Even the Italian-standard Caprese salad is given a baroque description: “Fresh mozzarella without added preservatives, produced by a small dairy farm (Gioie d'Italia) in Puglia, pink tomatoes, pesto”.

Written in Bulgarian and in Italian, Cinecittà's menu opens with the restaurant's concept: Serving a modernised version of “classical” Italian dishes in which top-quality ingredients are minimally processed in order to highlight their natural flavours. It informs diners that staples such as olive oil, flour, cheeses and cured meats are imported from Italy. A list of organic and biodiverse Bulgarian farms is reported to deliver the rest of the ingredients.

One might think that the menu was designed to address the expectations of visiting Hollywood stars, who can, indeed, be seen

around; however, the *osteria* mainly caters to locals. In fact, dozens of restaurants in Sofia feature similar menus, overwhelming their customers with the names of refined or exotic ingredients and references to their remote or exclusive origin, offering somewhat excessively complex and imaginative cuisine. To first-class restaurants, and increasingly so to less flamboyant ones too, the elaborateness of dishes and their descriptions have come to be seen as a standard.

Sofia's restaurant scene may still lack consistency in the quality of food and service, and the food that is served may often fail to meet the ambitious claims of the menus. Yet anyone who remembers the grey, suffocating bore communist Sofia's restaurants were two and a half decades ago, with their plain food and often malicious treatment, would be startled to see their transformation. For according to any standard, places like Cinecittà, which number a few dozen in Sofia, speak of developed professional cooking and high customer expectations.

### Scene 2

Not far from the port of Belgrade on the Danube, squeezed between a local supermarket and a print shop, surrounded by residential blocks, is Homa. If interpreted as being written in Cyrillic, the sign with the name reads Noma, the same as the famous Copenhagen venue often described as the best restaurant in the world. The pun is intended, and Homa profiles itself as a fine dining establishment.

A New York Times article described it as “a white haute-cuisine temple with soaring glass windows and a pleasant patio” (Sherwood,

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2016). Indeed, the menu is imaginative. The dishes combine things like *foie gras* with blackberry on carob and sunflower butter, or venison fillet and black truffle *carpaccio* with juniper and Pinot Noir dressing served with mustard ice cream.

The selection does not contain exuberant references to boutique foreign producers like that of Sofia's Cinectittá, but the cuisine sounds ambitiously modern. Like in Sofia, Belgrade restaurants with similarly inventive menus have begun to open only in the last decade. Those fine dining spots that do not resemble traditional restaurants are still sparse, according to the owners of Homa, mainly due to the “income levels and the ability to travel” of the city's residents, on whom the success of these establishments depends (Guttman, 2015). Regardless, restaurants like Homa increasingly challenge the idea of the Serbian capital as a place of “sausage-filled cuisine” (Sherwood, 2016).

## 1. Introduction

The reasons behind the changing urban foodscape in Bulgaria and Serbia, as in any place in world, are complex. Global developments, including the boom of culinary information available on the Internet and the increasing interest in new tastes amongst European and global middle-class consumers fuelled by intensifying international trade and tourism, are responsible in part (Scholliers, 2007, 2009).

But what is specific to Bulgaria and Serbia is that after a shared period of isolation from the Western part of the continent, the last decade was defined by efforts toward reunification. Processes of integration on the cultural, economic and political levels between formerly divided Eastern and Western Europe have guided important cultural and political transformation in the former satellites of the Soviet Union, and Bulgaria was no exception. The country's accession to the European Union has been a central transformative threshold. Serbia also lived through a period of isolation - especially in the turbulent post-Yugoslav years - and then headed towards a closer relationship with the countries of the European Union.

This article enquires about how this reorientation has affected people's diets, foodways and tastes. It explores how Europeanisation is understood in the two countries, how is it constituted, and how it changes foodways and food tastes in the Balkans. To offset the effects of actual EU membership on this part of the public foodscape, I use the comparison between the restaurant scenes in Sofia and Belgrade. While restaurants are not representative of people's daily diets, they do simultaneously serve as trend-setters and reflect consumers' food culture and expectations. Seeking out evidence of the impact Europeanisation has had on local cuisines, the article analyses the intricate ways in which the “national” and the “European” interact, as well as how tensions between them are being resolved. With this article I continue the discussion of whether Europeanisation threatens to obliterate the national character of material and/or immaterial culture and argue that, in contrast, it in fact contributes to engagement with and the re-invention of national cuisines in both their material and immaterial aspects.

Food is seen by scholars as an excellent lens with which to observe social changes in former communist Europe - several researchers have argued that it is a particularly important indicator of social development in the region, as it has been “central to both socialist and post-socialist reformist projects, as social engineers have used food to promote new societies based on modernity, progress, and culturedness” (see Caldwell, 2009, p. 3, quoting; Glants & Toomre, 1997).

What “Europeanisation” means on a cultural, economic and political level has been and continues to be debated, but it seems that controversies are played out more in public debates than within academia. In general the cultural constructs of the “Europeans” and the “West” have long and specific history in the Balkans. The idea of sharing a civilisation with the West has been considered both desirable and unreal throughout the past century and a half. Anthropologist Kiossev even argued that the idea of being European, but not quite, has

been a constitutive (traumatic) element of the very identity, which the Bulgarians have developed as a nation around the constitution of their modern state in the 19th century (Kiossev, 1999). Similar perception has been distinctively observed in Serbia (Zivkovic, 2000).

What concerns the developments in the last decades, many scholars generally agree on the positive social effects of the Europeanisation process. Borneman and Fowler (1997, p. 489) described Europeanisation as a process that redefines “forms of identification with territory and people”. The identities resulting from it transcend traditional ideas of society and polity and are cosmopolitan, rather than related to “something specific as a European People, a European society, a European supra-state or European heritage” (Delanty & Rumford, 2005, p. 23). Following these arguments, Wilson (2006, p. 17) asserted that Europeanisation might be seen as a radical change in “the groundwork of local, regional and national social, economic and political frames of reference”.

These developments have frequently troubled different social layers in Eastern European countries. While the post-communist enthusiasm over newly acquired political and cultural freedoms has receded, doubts have arisen, often fuelled by growing nationalism and populism. One of the most vocal is the fear that Europeanisation might be endangering national identities. This argument is not new to neither the Bulgarian or the Serbian society - it repeats developments from the second half of the 19th century, when in a very similar way the increasing cultural involvement with Western Europe was conceptualised as binomial and threatening the forming national identities, as based on “native”. Food, as an important element of identity construction, has therefore been an object of emotional discussions (Gavrilova, 2018).

Reacting to rising public fears of possible cultural assimilation, unification and obliteration of the national, scholars have analysed some of the consequences of European integration and found the opposite of assimilation. Zinger (2010) and Milenković (2013) noted that integration ensures sovereignty over the interpretation of past and over current cultural referential frameworks. Focusing on food, De Soucey (2010, p. 433) demonstrated how EU policies facilitate and accommodate what she calls the use of food “to demarcate and sustain the emotive power of national attachment”.

Acknowledging this debate as socially important, this article offers some evidence of how closer interactions with EU countries stimulate local culture. Observed differences between Sofia and Belgrade also reveal the effect of actual EU membership on people's everyday routines.

The choice of comparing Sofia and Belgrade rests on the fact that both countries are pursuing a future within the European Union; while Bulgaria has been an EU member since January 2007, Serbia is still negotiating its membership (a process that began in 2014).

The analogy is further facilitated by the cultural and gastronomic proximity between the two cities, their similar size and national role against which the degree of European integration currently constitutes a difference. The cuisine of Serbia, just like that of Bulgaria, belongs to the shared pool of Balkan cuisine, which is a historical crossroads of Oriental, Mediterranean and Central-European influences. Centred on meats and bread, the culinary tastes of the two nations have been established as being relatively much closer to one another than to other countries in the region, such as Greece or Turkey (Krusteva-Blagoeva, 2010:16), even if the latter two cuisines are undoubtedly the origin of many regional dishes.

Apart from the great similarities between the two national cuisines and foodways, as well as both countries' shared past, some differences are also of importance to this research. During the period of state socialism in the 20th century, the Yugoslav federation enjoyed much greater freedom of movement for people and trade with the West than Bulgaria. Under the later years of Tito and under Milošević, Serbs migrated in significant numbers to and from Austria, Western Germany and Switzerland, amongst other places, where many of them worked in the HoReCa (Hotel, Restaurant, Catering) business. Such cultural

exchange was far more limited in Bulgaria under Zhivkov.

Another difference came from the structure of the Yugoslav federation, which placed Belgrade as the capital of multiple nations and territories, including the Adriatic coast. As the regions of Istria and Dalmatia were historically greatly influenced by Venice, their cuisines incorporate many foods and foodways associated today with Italian cuisine. One important example of this historical influence is the production of local varieties of hand-made pasta in these territories, which today are part of Croatia. Additionally, seafood constitutes an important part of the menu.

The 1990s set Sofia and Belgrade further apart. The wars in former Yugoslavia pushed the Serbian capital into isolation and the country, which lost territories and allies, developed strong nationalistic resentments (Greenberg, 2006). Meanwhile Sofia made small but generally consistent steps towards EU membership.

In recent years, both countries have shared their path towards European integration as well as the general social consensus that this integration will present a 'normalisation' of state systems and people's lives (see Caldwell, 2009 on Eastern Europe and Zikic, 2012 and Brujic, 2015 on Serbia). These differences and similarities are taken into account and discussed further in the analysis of the source material.

## 2. Sources and methods

The study is based on an analysis of online self-presentation of popular restaurants that were operating in Sofia and Belgrade at the time of research. The most popular online restaurant guides according to the global rating system Alexa,<sup>1</sup> Na vidiku for Belgrade and Zavedenia for Sofia, were used to select groups of relevant restaurants in the two cities.<sup>2</sup>

In both cases, an overlap was sought out between restaurants' ratings and their self-identification as "European", meaning that they specialize in a particular cuisine of a European-Union nation or that of a region which includes EU lands (such cases were "Mediterranean" and "International"), and not being indicated as serving local cuisine. In this way I formed two equally-sized groups in Belgrade and Sofia consisting of 22 restaurants each. The restaurants in the groups turned out to be within the average to upmarket price range. The web guides referenced do not present exhaustive data-bases of the two cities' restaurants, hence the two samples represent only a portion of the popular restaurants falling into the relevant group. However, they are equal in quality and representativeness, as they are based on significant primary material (the selection methods were applied to 820 restaurants in Belgrade and 1025 restaurants in Sofia).

After identifying the groups, I researched the restaurants' websites, their menus and, in some cases, their Facebook pages. Barthes' idea (1997) of the dish as "a functional unit of a system of communication" was used in previous research in Bulgaria by scholars like Ivanova and Vukov (2010) and Gavrilova (2018). I borrowed their approach to restaurant food and menus and applied quantitative and qualitative methods, including discourse analysis and close reading, to map the information from the sources in two tables which then served as a basis for the comparative analysis. To answer the research question of how Europeanisation as a general trend and EU membership as a technical element of it have affected food tastes and foodways, the sources were

<sup>1</sup> Alexa was formerly an independent global site-ranking system; it is now part of the Amazon group.

<sup>2</sup> As Na vidiku is a general guide, rather one solely for restaurants, its data was supplemented with that of the most popular amongst the (relatively) specialized restaurant guides, Belgrade Beat. As Na vidiku did not suggest significant ratings-related activity, and Belgrade Beat does not include any system to rate the restaurants, Trip Advisor was used to finalize the selection. For Sofia only, Zavedenia was used alone, as it is a vibrant restaurants-only guide of great popularity and offers both a general overview and an indication of the popularity of restaurants.

studied with a focus on the language of descriptions, ingredients, types of dishes, contained references to cuisines, regions of origin and producers, expected and demonstrated expertise, and presentation of the chefs. The presupposed customer interest as well as presumed specific knowledge were also examined.

A marked difference in the restaurants of different price categories in both capitals suggested a significant differentiation in food culture and the expectations of customers from different social groups. My research does not capture these differences: further research of greater complexity is needed to provide enough information to allow for such analysis. Another limitation of the analysis is that it is based on sources allowing for only a rudimentary time perspective. This weakness is to some extent compensated for via references to other sources.

The next section presents the findings of the comparative analysis: how the term "European" is used by the restaurants in the samples; how European national cuisines are represented in each of the groups; and the scope of access to specialized knowledge, ingredients and human resources which is evident in the restaurants' menus and (self-)presentations. After that, I explore how "Europeanisation" constructs and resolves tensions within a generic binomial opposition to the "national" and I also discuss the role of European integration in the observed trends and its impact on broader foodscapes.

### 2.1. Identifying as 'European'

The research brought up one obvious contrast in the inclination among Sofia and Belgrade restaurants to use the label "European". Neither of the two Serbian restaurant guides uses the term as a tag. It is also not encountered in the self-presentation of the restaurants on their websites. The two most popular identification tags referring to European cuisines are "Italian" (10 in the group) and "Mediterranean" (9). The more general "international" is also used (5), while "French" and "Spanish" are each used once.

By contrast, the term "European" is commonplace in the Bulgarian Zavedenia. A search for the word delivers 511 results in Sofia alone. Additionally, "European" is widely used on the restaurant websites and in their menus (12 in the group of 22, as presented on Zavedenia). In some cases, it seems as though it is used to signify Bulgarian cuisine as part of a greater pool, and sometimes it labels a specific national cuisine from Western Europe or indicates the broad region. "Mediterranean" (6 in the group) and "international" (4) are also popular labels. Equally present are the national tags "Italian" (10), "Greek" (3), "Spanish" (1) and "French" (1).

Thus, identification as "European" seems to be far more common in the Bulgarian group, but there are still substantial similarities in both guides' representation of the countries' national cuisines; the Mediterranean region dominates the foodscape outside of national cuisine.

It is difficult to attribute the frequent use of the label "European" in Bulgaria only to the abundance of non-European restaurants, as such restaurants seem to be equally plentiful in both capitals: any restaurant guide search delivers dozens of Indian, Japanese and Chinese establishments. A more likely explanation might be that "European" is not as strongly constituted as a category of generalisation in Serbia as it is in Bulgaria. The higher levels of nationalism and the bitterness in the Serbian society towards the European intervention in the Yugoslavian wars, which were mentioned before and are documented as still present, might play certain role. In Sofia on the other hand the notion was boosted by post-communist aspirations for reunification with Western Europe, combined with the general national self-depreciation typical of the period. Having lived through communist isolationism, many people believed that although the country may be part of Europe geographically, the regime had kept it withdrawn from there in an economic and cultural sense. However, this is an interpretational hypothesis and further, separate research needs to be pursued in order to test it.

What, then, does being “European” consist of? The structure of information in the studied restaurant guides already offers a good illustration of the described taste for Italian/Mediterranean cuisine. The two categories on Na vidiku referring to European cuisine are “Italian restaurants” and “Gyro places”. In Belgrade Beat they are “Mediterranean” and “Italian”. There are separate sections for Mexican, Asian and Sushi, but not for Greek, Balkan, French, Spanish or any other European national or regional cuisine.

Zavedenia offers a search featuring a dozen national European cuisine labels (from Italian, Greek, Irish, Spanish, German and French to the very marginal Hungarian and Czech). But among them, only “Mediterranean” and “Pizzerias” comprise separate categories in the section for top restaurants. Finally, the three common pillars of the popular idea of “Italian food” (pasta, pizza and risotto) can be found on almost every menu around town.

The second most popular cuisine in both cities seems to be Greek. Although Greek restaurants are far less represented, Greek dishes very often appear on menus and comprise an important part of the locally represented “Mediterranean” cuisine. One reason for this specific situation might be that many Greek dishes and foodways, which are shared by the Balkan regional pool of cuisines, were incorporated in the past and are either considered by Serbs and Bulgarians “as their own” or are simply seen as ubiquitously regional and are not associated with Greece. In Bulgaria the small Greek diaspora (3048 people according to the census from 2011) might have contributed to the situation.

It may sound paradoxical, but French cuisine in some respects occupies the same status as Greek food in Sofia and Belgrade: some elements of it have been assimilated, while others are being reintroduced as an important part of the Mediterranean pool of dishes. Having played a central role in the shaping of the European restaurant menu (see Ferguson 2004 and Iomaire, 2009, amongst others), French cuisine was incorporated into the restaurant culture of both countries under communism. The communist tourist organization Balkantourist, which ran nearly half of the restaurants in Bulgaria, made dishes like *Chateaubriand* steak, fish *orly*, or *cordon bleu* ubiquitous; by 1989, they were perceived to be generic international restaurant dishes.

The situation in Serbia was similar, as the movement of people working in the HoReCa industry across Europe also ensured access to international hotel standards. Some traces of this can even be found in the contemporary menus of the sample - Salon 1905 offers the old-school restaurant dish, Tournedo Rossini,<sup>3</sup> and Dorian Grey offers a clear French beef bouillon.

In recent decades, French cuisine has been rediscovered in a different light. The flavours of Southern France are featured on the menus of many Mediterranean restaurants. Strictly French restaurants are rarer. One place in the Belgrade group defines its menu as being based on French cuisine but also not confined within the limits of it. At least three French restaurants run by French chefs exist in Sofia, but none of them found their way into the sample due to relatively low ratings.

Another cuisine of interest appears to be that of Spain, but it is also less represented, with only one restaurant having a consistently Spanish menu in the Sofia sample. One Spanish-Latin American and one Spanish-Latin-American-Asian fusion restaurant exist in Belgrade. Other cuisines with proximity and historical influence - Central-European and Austrian or German - remain very occasionally presented. Food originating north of Paris seems to be limited to Belgian chocolate and beer and Dutch Gouda cheese.

This hierarchy of the local taste for varying foreign cuisines is by no means exceptionally Eastern European. In her study on West Germany, Mohring (2008: 136) quoted coinciding survey results: almost 50 per cent of respondents “preferred Italian restaurants, followed by Chinese and Greek restaurants (21 per cent and 18 per cent, respectively).

<sup>3</sup> A dish prepared with beef filet mignon with *foie gras*, truffles and Madeira sauce.

French cuisine was named by only 2 per cent and Spanish cuisine by just 1 per cent.

## 2.2. Levels of mastery

Here “mastery” is used to describe two closely related inquiries: how detailed and far-reaching the restaurant’s competence was regarding the specific cuisine, as demonstrated through the menu, and how exhaustive the knowledge expected of customers was. The term is meant to capture not only the consciously acquired information, but the entire cultural constructs, as they were formed through history of exchanges and experiences and intuition.

While in both countries Italian cuisine seems to enjoy the greatest popularity, its introduction has a different history. Serbs’ affection for this cuisine seems to date at least back to the golden years of Tito’s Yugoslavia or earlier. Already by the 1940s in Slovenia, the influence of immigration from fascist Italy was being felt (Godina-Golija, 2003). One of the contemporary Italian restaurants in Belgrade presents its opening as a “return” of the old passion for Italian cuisine in Serbia:

When eight years ago (...) La Piazza opened, in Belgrade returns the real passion for the tastes of the Apennines. The Italian cuisine, which was in these lands for long the only present and accepted national cuisine besides our domestic one, had slightly lost its charms before the influx of Far Eastern and Fusion cuisine. (...) (La Piazza, 2018). [SIC!]

Italian flavours were also introduced to Belgrade via the Adriatic seacoast, in Istria and Dalmatia, where several generations of Serbs spent their summers familiarising themselves with the local home-made pasta production, inherited from the times of the Venetian Republic. Bulgarians, in contrast, discovered Italian cuisine only after the end of communism. No cookbook from before 1944 indicates any serious knowledge of it, and state-socialism’s isolationism also contributed for the delay. In the 1980s a local version of pizza, called “garnished pitta”, was introduced as a street food, and in 1989 Bulgarians were still using the word “pasta” solely as the name of a type of layered cake.

Currently in both Balkan capitals, the local restaurants’ menus indicate that a process of incorporating Italian dishes into the traditional diet is under way: pizza, pasta and risotto are ubiquitous. While there is a clear awareness of their Italian origin, they have been blended with the local food and adapted to local tastes. The internationally popular types of Italian sauces are almost considered generic, as are many types of pasta. But the range of well-incorporated dishes subject to recreation/adaptation is much broader than that and reaches through all parts of the menu.

One common observation in Belgrade and Sofia is that since many restaurants offer these well-known “standards”, places which seek identification as Italian find it difficult to profile themselves. Some find solutions such as excelling in making homemade pasta or particularly skilfully baked pizza. There are several examples in Belgrade, like Trattoria Campania, which invited 2017 world champion *maestro pizzaiuolo* Michele Leo to showcase his work to customers, or La Campanella, advertising its Chef Pantelev as a World Pizza Association member and Federazione Italiana Pizzaioli nel Mondo alumnus.

Another currently more popular way for Italian restaurants to profile themselves is by expanding their menus towards less familiar territories. The bulk of restaurants in both cities are making similar efforts by offering a range of Italian starters and cooked dishes. There is some difference, though, in the direction in which this is done in Belgrade and Sofia.

In Belgrade the focus and goal seem to be set on the authenticity of the recipes. Overall, dishes beyond the standards seem to either refer to authentic Italian recipes or to combinations of generic (not specified in terms of origin) ingredients which aim at producing Italian tastes. For example, some *petta* dishes of this sort would be chicken medallions wrapped in *pancetta* and stuffed with basil and mozzarella, beef in a

Parmigiano crust (on Cuoco's menu), chicken filet with broccoli and Gorgonzola (La Piazza) or chicken with mozzarella and rocket (Amici).

Sometimes the names of the dishes include references to particular regions of Italy, for example “Ragu alla Napoletana” or “Calamari all’Amalfitana” (Trattoria Campania). Authenticity is also sought through indicating the origin of ingredients: there are a lot of examples featuring the more popular ingredients (Parmigiano Romano, for instance) and an exceptionally broad range of products with mentioned origin.

Italian restaurants in Sofia also exploit the authenticity concept, to a greater extent than in Belgrade. But one difference that stands out is the availability of modernised and even author's versions of Italian dishes. The foremost example of this in the selected group is Cinecittà. While its menu is strongly connected with Italian cuisine, including multiple references and ingredients, it is also an exuberant modernist re-interpretation of familiar Italian tastes. It broadly seems that if by the late 1980s Belgrade had a significant advance on Sofia in its familiarity with Italian cuisine, now the situation has been reversed.

In general, creative attitudes towards Italian cuisine are visible on the menus of many Mediterranean restaurants, which do include Italian recipes, ingredients and tastes but do not vow to be limited by them. Such an approach can be found in both countries and has particularly pronounced results in Sofia, where many menus intensively exploit the increasing access to information, techniques and ingredients. In Belgrade, one example is Amphora, which employs the concept of *carpaccio* to a dessert made of pineapple and also offers a “cream-capuccino with shrimp”. In Sofia's Este, the chefs offer their own authored recipes, an example dish being the “Goat cheese beetroot cannelloni with ‘Jamon Iberico de Bellota’, black cherries, pear chutney, horse-radish and maple syrup”.

Greek and French cuisine have been appropriated in a similar way, but with some peculiarities. Greek cuisine has historically co-created and been co-created along with that of Serbia and Bulgaria within the Ottoman-influenced Balkan region. But Greece's greater access to sea-food, vast coastline and warmer climate have worked to profile its food in some important ways. Contemporary Bulgarian and Serbian cuisines share many dishes and features with Northern mainland Greek cuisine: abundant filo-pastry dishes, the ubiquitous use of feta and yogurt, the combination of mint with meat, particularly lamb, and vegetable and bean dishes baked in clay pots, to name but a few.

Probably due to this, contemporary Greek restaurants in the two capitals profile themselves with dishes which Greek cuisine does not share with the local cuisines. The contemporary presentation in Sofia and Belgrade is strongly influenced by typical Greek restaurants on the seaside, called *psarotaverna*. Important elements of the menu are grilled fresh or sun-dried octopus, deep-fried calamari, *tarama* caviar and olives, *skordalya* dip and grilled freshly caught Mediterranean fish.

The popularity of this type of food in Bulgaria is directly related to the political process of its integration within the EU, which has allowed Bulgarians to freely travel to Greece since 2001. In the following years, hundreds of thousands of Bulgarians began visiting this country and their number has grown exponentially as of late: from half a million in 2012 to over two and a half million in 2016. Currently, Greece remains the most-visited destination for Bulgarian tourists (Dnevnik, 2017). The number of Serbs travelling to Greece for tourism in the last year fluctuated between 620 and 990 thousand (UNWTO, 2018).

The comparison between the Greek restaurants from the two groups shows that both explicitly strive to defend their claim to authenticity and present themselves as a piece of Greece's seaside on the Balkan mainland. Piatakia in Belgrade describes itself as “more than a just a Greek restaurant”.

It is a Greek destination in Belgrade, a get-away, a Greek lifestyle and philosophy spot, with Greek colours, flavours, aromas and the most important – people, all those who have at least one thing in common: a wish to relax and enjoy the journey with us (...)

Traveling every day together, we don't make clients but friends (Piatakia, 2018).

In the same vein, Yamas in Sofia announces that its “menu offers authentic and traditional Greek dishes which would make you feel that you are in Greece itself.” This type of restaurant marketing, as a momentary escape into the world of holidays and carefree time spent along southern beaches, is widely used across Central and Northern Europe (see Mohring, 2008), where Greece is a popular recreational destination.

Both the restaurant in Belgrade and the one in Sofia presuppose a significant degree of knowledge about Greek cuisine on the part of their customers, which could be explained by the popularity of Greece as a tourist destination in both countries. The difference between the two is that the menu of the Bulgarian restaurant is broader and offers a greater variety of fresh fish (thirteen kinds of fish, compared to four).

The restaurants offering Greek cuisine as part of Mediterranean food sometimes also turn towards claiming such authenticity, but more often they feel free to interpret the recipes creatively. A typical example is this variation of a Greek salad from Sofia's Capo: “Aromatic peeled almonds, cucumber, salad onions, fresh peppers, herbal mousse, white cheese, mixed green lettuce with Mediterranean pitta bread, olive oil and Kalamata olives”.

As mentioned above, French restaurants are practically non-existent in Belgrade and number just a few in Sofia. French dishes do appear in the Mediterranean *mélange*, though, again with particular reference to Sofia's restaurants. Belgrade's Kalemeganska Terasa, Casa Nova, Dorian Gray and Salon 1905 feature French bistro classics such as onion soup, snails, *foie gras* and Niçoise salad. Sofia's menus, in contrast, tend to offer variations and innovations of these: “*Foie gras* with kumquat purée, saffron chicory, white asparagus cream and sweet potato sauce” (Este); “*Foie gras* with Saint Jacque and miso” (Capo).

Lastly, Spanish cuisine is also currently represented in the two capitals, and while interest in it seems equally peripheral, there are slight differences in its representation. In Belgrade two restaurants in the studied group offer Spanish cuisine, and at both of them it is blended with related cuisines: one treats it as part of the Spanish-Latin-American pool and the other incorporates it into a recent fusion cuisine trend that connects Latino/Spanish and Far Eastern cuisines.

The version in Sofia is more limited to strictly Spanish cuisine, with references to regions like Galicia and Valencia. In some cases, information is given to verify the use of correct ingredients, such as the sort of rice used in the paella. The paella itself is offered not only in its rice version, but also with tiny *fideuà* noodles, a variation on the dish that is generally less popular across Europe. The restaurant also offers less internationalised dishes, such as *callos madrinellos*, *mollejas de lechazo* and *carrilleras*.

Thus, the researched material indicates that Sofia's restaurants see a greater need to prove their “authenticity”. They offer broader segments of the represented national cuisines and demonstrate more confidence in the knowledge of their customers, whose expectations they also seem to find higher. This appears to be related to the increased presence of chefs who are native to the relevant cuisines. It also seems to stem from the more extensive travel opportunities of the targeted customers. As a result, the examined group of restaurants in Sofia seeks (and finds ways) to demonstrate a deeper mastery of and commitment to the European cuisines it presents to local customers.

### 2.3. Chefs and their ingredients

If in the range and depth of culinary knowledge there seem to be many similarities between Sofia and Belgrade, such are less obvious when it comes to access to ingredients. A general overview showed that there is a certain pool of widespread foods originating from EU countries and which are widely available, used and named without any explanations. This pool happens to appear on the menu of any

restaurant, specialized or not in the specific cuisine, to which the ingredient is related. The bulk of these foods are cured meats and cheeses, but it also includes some vegetables untypical for local cuisines.

The main difference between the restaurants in Sofia and in Belgrade is their access to ingredients from European Union countries beyond this pool. As a gross generalization, four restaurants from the group of 22 in Belgrade include a significant number of specific ingredients apart from this pool on their menus, while the same is valid for 15 restaurants out of the group of 22 in Sofia. Another six restaurants in both cities have a few such ingredients on their menus, while 12 in Belgrade and one in Sofia do not seem to work with anything beyond this main pool.

Further illustration of this difference is that the Bulgarian restaurants in the group more greatly emphasise the origin of their ingredients. In Serbia, four restaurants provide specific ingredients, offering a formidable range of Italian cheeses and meats, while the other menus accentuate the originality or ethnic affiliation of the recipes but stick to using ingredients which are more conventional for the local market, sometimes loosely indicating their national origin (like the “Spanish cheese” on De Frida’s menu).

In comparison, the restaurants in Sofia demonstrate what seems to be excessive attention to their ingredients, both regarding quality and origin. The cheeses, particularly the Italian ones, are somewhat expensive and this is also true of the cured meats section. But most notably developed seems to be the list of raw meats, seafood and other ingredients in which the choice is indeed abundant: menus often employ lengthy and enticing explanations that test their clients’ geographical knowledge and endurance to temptation. They include a cascade of soft-shell crab, Greek blue crab, yellowfin tuna, French-farmed chicken, quail and their eggs, Black Angus meat (Protected Geographical Indication, 5th stage of marbling), French Charolais beef, horse and bison meat, sweetbreads from milk-fed lambs (Protected Geographical Indication from Ireland) and many others. Lentils and beans, leafy vegetables, potatoes of all colours and other long lists of ingredients add to the baroque opulence.

For the restaurants from the Sofia sample, just offering “pork chops” as was the norm for so many years in Bulgaria seems to be perceived as inadequate. It seems that informing the customer about which corner of the world the meat comes from, how the animal was raised, how the meat was transformed by careful, considerate and skilful hands and precise equipment, etc. have all become indispensable to serving a dish in a good restaurant.

The ingredients are not simply mentioned but are employed to facilitate several concepts pursued by Sofia’s restaurant menus: authenticity, abundance and travelling with your palate. These three lines, also present in Belgrade, here seem to have gone to the extreme in an ambition to impress and convince clients of the Bulgarian capital’s cosmopolitanism and sophistication today – a sophistication which sometimes comes with misspellings and typos.

Another difference which transpires from the comparison between the two groups of restaurants is the presence of “native-cooking” chefs representing their cuisines. On the websites of the Belgrade group, one Greek chef, who cooks for the Greek restaurant, one French *patissier*, who works part-time to prepare the desserts at Voules-Vous, and one Italian consultant are mentioned. The presence of Italians is particularly visible in Sofia’s restaurants: five native Italian chefs/owners/sommeliers, one Italian-Bulgarian and one German-Bulgarian (a celebrity chef in Bulgaria who offers author’s cuisine in his restaurant André). Both in Belgrade and in Sofia, some restaurants emphasise their owners’ or chefs’ experience abroad (such is the cases for Belgrade’s Salon 105 and Little Bay and Yamas in Sofia).

Overall, the restaurants’ self-presentations suggest a slight difference between the two cities in the attention which is attributed to the personality of the chef. In Sofia, thirteen of the restaurants profile their chefs; in Belgrade, only six do so. The concept of author’s cuisine also seems more prominent and celebrated in Sofia than in Belgrade at this

stage.

#### 2.4. Building and resolving tensions with national cuisine

One might expect the broadening representation of European cuisines in both countries to create certain tensions within the national foodscapes. The very identification of a restaurant as one that offers foreign ethnic cuisine positions it, in a certain sense, as “alien” and opposed to what is one’s own, the “national”.

This generic binomial opposition taps into an existing public anxiousness that European integration will challenge and threaten national identities with fading away. Such feeling has been identified on a more general level as a contest over national identity (Milenković, 2013). It is also visible in recurring discourse over the European Union “banning” ingredients or dishes that are considered as essential elements of national foodways. Publications of this nature, often based on misinterpretations about different consumer-protection measures, have appeared regularly in the Bulgarian press since the country became a member-state. One of the latest examples was the claim that the EU is about to “ban tripe soup, *rakia* and *duners*” (Berberov, 2017). Tripe soup is often announced as the nation’s “best-loved” soup (Zvezdev, 2013) and *rakia*, a traditionally produced drink high in alcohol, is also seen as an essential element of the national food/drink-way. Within this discourse, Europeanisation is seen as a process of de-nationalisation.

Thinking along the same lines, one could presume that the influx of new ingredients and of foreign food culture would increasingly marginalize their local counterparts. In fact, my material suggests that quite the opposite occurs. Yet there are clear indications that the increasing presence and knowledge of foreign cuisines has a developmental impact on local ones, as I will now show.

It seems that the introduction of food and foodways from Europe has pushed local chefs to invest more energy into local food too, trying to adapt it to their understanding of modern diets and modern tastes. Whether Italian, French or Mediterranean, even the most clearly profiled restaurants regularly sneak at least a couple of local dishes onto the menu. Borrowing techniques and ideas, they try to adapt them to the higher demands of their often wealthy and knowledgeable customers. This happens all the more often in restaurants which avoid strictly identifying with national cuisines, opting for eclectically composed menus instead.

In an environment where many caterers adapt to mass popular tastes with “no search for authentic dishes with original names and from local ingredients” (Gavrilova, 2018), “European cuisine” restaurants, which are also upper-class places, work to promote the value of the regional and the local. Their menus clearly suggest that an appreciation for this has developed for both foreign and national products. It is often expressed through concrete references, rather than general and vague claims such as those observed by Gavrilova in her study of the notion of the “national” in contemporary Bulgarian restaurants indicated as serving local cuisine.

Looking back at the recent impact of the post-communist opening up of Bulgarian cuisine, a range of rediscovered domestic products, dishes and foodways can be identified, all of which resulted from internationalisation. Some of them came in the 1990s with the commodification of previously non-commercial products such as wild mushrooms, in particular the porcini abundant in Bulgaria’s forests, fresh (not dried) herbs like basil and oregano, Black Sea fish (marinated in an artisanal manner) and cheeses in their smoked, fresh, unsalted and soft forms, among others. The Italian restaurants were the first to start exploiting combinations with porcini mushrooms in the 1990s. Sprigs of fresh herbs, however available they may have been in the wild, were first introduced by the newly opened high-end restaurants which attempted French and Italian-inspired fine dining in the 2000s. The idea of producing and consuming fresh (non-matured) and reduced-salt cheeses was also influenced by a growing public familiarity with mozzarella.

The restaurant menus in Belgrade also suggest a growing understanding of the value of local ingredients. Many products appear with articulated reference to their origin (for example, Montenegrin and Nieguš prosciutto or cheese from the Croatian island of Pag) to add value to the food being offered.

While the abundance of techniques, ingredients and equipment may not beautify local cuisines in all cases, it does push for their redefinition. Those restaurants which offer author's cuisine work particularly hard to recreate and modernize Bulgarian cuisine and align it with the standards of the modern Western cuisines in which many of their chefs were trained. Local dishes are freshened up by unexpected ingredients, lightened textures and challenged stereotypes. One of many examples would be the transformation of potato salad – typically boiled potatoes, white onions, perhaps some smoked mackerel, vinegar and sunflower oil – into “Bulgarian potato salad with leek, quail egg, homemade smoked trout fillet and trout caviar” (Andrè).

Other ingredients previously unused in cooking, though popular in Bulgaria, have been introduced to add originality. Lavender, roses and *Mursal* tea can be found as reimagined, edible components of complex meals.

Similar examples can be found in the development of Serbian menus in recent years. National cuisine is often reworked by chefs to become as interesting to customers as the food borrowed from other European cuisines. The menu at Homa is an example of this. Much-loved Serbian *kaymak*, which for years was usually served up unadorned as three ice-cream balls on a leaf of lettuce, is here presented as Zlatar's breaded *kaymak* with local black truffles and walnuts.

Thus, the idea that the European obliterates the local is not supported by actual practices going on within the “Europeanising” restaurant scene. It seems that it instead pushes chefs to search for modern representations of national cuisines, adapted to customers' heightened expectations – and challenging them. In that regard, they pursue more complexity, increase the presence of relevant local ingredients and lighten fare by using vegetables more freely than meat, which dominated restaurant menus in the two countries for decades. This latest trend could also be interpreted as a (delayed) adoption of what has been a dominant element in Europe since the 1970s: nutritional ideology about the healthy nature of a Mediterranean diet.

Another aspect which reduces the possibility of building up tensions between the “European” and the “national” seems to be the quite liberally conceptualised idea of national cuisine in both countries. While restaurants focused on national cuisine seem to be actively constructing this (Gavrilova, 2018), popular writing on it in many cases acknowledges the existence of multiple foreign influences as well as the lack of clear borders between national, on the one side, and regional and European cuisines on the other. The website of Sofia's Amphora, for example, has republished an article from Wikipedia presenting Bulgarian cuisine as a “synthesis of European and Oriental cuisines”. It also avoids inventing traditions, rather choosing to explicitly attribute some “national” dishes' authorship to the communist tourism industry.<sup>4</sup>

In Serbia, too, the discourse on national cuisine being influenced by and closely related to other Balkan cuisines is very apparent. The country's national foodways are often described as belonging to the pool of Balkan and Mediterranean food: “a rough generalisation would be that it is a combination of Greek, Bulgarian, Turkish and Hungarian cuisine,” writes one website (Serbia.com, 2018).<sup>5</sup>

To post-communist Europe, past aspirations for Europeanisation in many ways expressed a desire to join the material and cultural world of Western Europe. It was an imaginary world beyond the Iron Curtain that was the object of such desires for integration. And indeed, looking at the data quoted regarding European cuisines' representation in Sofia

and Belgrade, one might conclude that the “Europeanisation” of the restaurant scenes in Sofia and Belgrade has consisted of approximating those of Western Europe.

However, food is a specific domain where other factors such as proximity of taste, nutritional ideologies, local geography and the economy also play a role. As demonstrated by the research material, not all of Western Europe has been embraced with the same enthusiasm: when it comes to food; instead, local preferences tend towards southern, Mediterranean cuisines. Promoted widely since the 1960s, the Mediterranean diet has been appropriated as a standard across the entire continent (Scarpellini, 2018).

In this sense, the “internationalisation” of the restaurant scene in the Balkans may appear to be following suit after Northern Europe. In a way, it is. But there is more to it. The above discussed rediscovery and reinvention of local ingredients, seemingly inspired by the new presence of Mediterranean cuisines, suggests an important difference between the processes taking place in the Balkans and in North-Western Europe. While to countries like Germany, the choice seems to be between “domestic” and “foreign” (see Mohring, 2008, for an example of German cuisine being viewed as old-fashioned, bourgeois and narrow-minded as opposed to the leftist and modern Greek and Italian, p. 141), in the Balkans this seems to signify a reunification of the region within its natural borders.

It has often been argued that national cuisines are by default imagined, as foodways traverse national borders and only regional cuisines actually exist (Bradatan, 2003; Krusteva-Blagoeva, 2010; Mintz, 1996). In this sense, the processes of “Europeanisation” in Sofia and Belgrade could also be seen as a reintegration of national cuisines into their traditional food regions.

### 3. Conclusion

The source material suggests that just as they share a history, Sofia and Belgrade in many ways share the same modernity. Their citizens' food preferences and food hierarchies have a similar background and seem to be heading in the same direction. Acknowledging food as part of the cultural industry as a co-creator of lifestyles (Bell & Valentine, 1997; Gavrilova, 2018), one might argue that an identical lifestyle ideal transpires in the two Balkan capitals: one which presupposes cosmopolitanism and savvy, wealth and knowledge drawn from any corner of the world.

However, there are also important differences. While the aspirations of restaurateurs might be pointing in the same direction, their dreams seem slightly easier to manifest in Sofia. The restaurant business in Sofia appears to cater to more demanding customers and possess access to a greater variety of specific luxury products from different geographical regions within the EU; it may also be better able to differentiate between them. Sofia additionally demonstrates its greater access to knowhow, which is directly brought in by greater numbers of migrating chefs. The equal access to culinary knowledge in Sofia and Belgrade facilitated by the Internet contrasts the different levels of access to products, as well as possibilities to travel and migrate.

If Europeanisation is essentially a cultural transformation, one associated with cosmopolitanism (Delanty & Rumford, 2005), it is challenging to identify and separate the effect of each on the developments observed here. However, the source material reveals clearly the instrumental role of European Union membership in the pursuit of Europeanisation as a goal on the level of everyday life. In particular, it seems that the freedom of movement of people and goods which comes with membership is responsible for certain technical-economic advantages. By facilitating access to ingredients, know-how and first-hand experience, and by changing the expectations of customers, seems to modify the entire cultural framework.

Just as Zinger (2010) and Milenković (2013) have argued, EU integration seems to ensure more sovereignty over the interpretation of cultural referential frameworks. In this particular case, it seems to be

<sup>4</sup> <https://sofia.zavedenia.com/2739/news/9414/Tradicionnata.bylga>.

<sup>5</sup> Similar interpretations are found from other media sources, such as *Kapital magazine*, 2018 and *Travelling Serbia*, 2018, amongst others.

providing greater sovereignty over foodways and definitions of national cuisine: they are no longer shaped by deficits or ideology, as they were under communism, but by possibilities and ideas.

Acknowledging that there is no such thing as fixed and objective “traditions” but that instead there is a notion of tradition that loosely follows changing foodways also means agreeing with the concept that food traditions are being constantly renegotiated. It seems that this process, when it goes hand in hand with actual integration in the EU, takes place with the involvement of better informed players and is empowered by greater access to resources and, hence, increased availability of choices.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2018.10.022>.

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