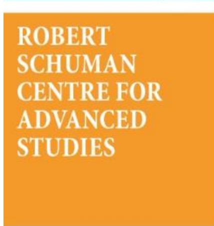

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The Revival of Islam in the Post-Communist Balkans: Coercive Nationalisms and New Pathways to God

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European University Institute
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Abstract

The Islamic 'revival' in the Balkans has raised many questions among mainstream politicians and academics, who tend to look at religion as a repository of ethno-national identities, and hence a risky 'depot', furthering divisions between and among national entities. How believers themselves discover, articulate and experience their faith, is often lost in the grand narratives of nations' assumed uniformity and the related criteria of inclusion and exclusion. This article shifts the analytical focus from nation-centric debates on the revival of Islam to believers' personalized discovery, practice and pursuit of faith since the fall of Communism. The analysis suggests a bifurcation between state authorities and centralized Islamic hierarchies that view Islam as an important marker of identity on the one hand, and emerging faith communities that rely upon alternative sources of knowledge and authority on the other. All the while, the Islamic phenomenon is no longer only the bearer of ethno-national alternatives, but also the symptom of new spaces that blend a variety of new actors as well as overlapping national, regional and global processes.

Keywords

Islam; religion and politics; national identity; faith communities; Balkans

Introduction[*]

The post-Communist resurgence of Islam across the Balkans has raised many questions, which are still exclusively studied within the context of the rise of nationalism and the violent conflicts of the early 1990s. The dissolution of the former Yugoslavia and the ferocity of conflicts and violence, moreover, have confined research to the most striking cases and particular moments in time (Poulton and Taji-Farouki 1997, 1). Consequently, the exploration of the Islamic phenomena is left to the mercy of nationalist and post-conflict paradigms, which necessarily essentialize the revival of Islam according to the ethno-national divisions of the day (Henig and Bielenin-Lenczowska 2013). However, the liberalization of religious conduct, and the normalization of the political arena in the two decades since the fall of Communism has unleashed a myriad of new encounters between believers and nationally envisaged religious categories and roles. In the 'opened up' religious market, believers face different sources of knowledge and information, and are more apt to choose, replicate, but also resist and recast the collective ethno-national divisions within which they maneuver.

This article delves into the emerging gap between ethno-national classificatory categories that constitute the organized religious fields and Muslim believers' own discovery and formulations of faith in the open market of religiosity that characterized the post-Communist era. Who are the actors that speak for Islam? What are the frames of the national religious 'field' and the categories upon which it builds? How do believers navigate those categories and choose what it is to be a good Muslim and how to pursue it in the open market of religiosity? What are the alternative pathways to God in the reconfigured relationship between nation, state, and faith in the post-Communist Balkans?

We approach these questions by critically exploring the mechanisms that sustain the state-organized religious field, and shifting the analytical focus to the disruptions of national categories and believers' self-discovery of faith within the liberalized religious spaces. This analytical angle permits us to analyze the revival of Islam at the intersection of the political and the sacred, blending a variety of national, regional and global processes, as well as continuities and ruptures in the post-Communist resurgence of faith.

The article proceeds in four sections. Section One unpacks mainstream research, which considers religion, and particularly Islam, as a marker of ethno-national communal identities. Section Two outlines the actors and mechanisms that sustain the state organized religious field and its ideological pillars. Section Three investigates contemporary 'breaks' that challenge the official religious sphere and provide believers with new alternatives, opportunities and ideas to pursue their faith. Section Four analyzes the diffraction of Islam into different actors with different alternatives concerning the revival of faith: State authorities and official Islamic institutions that frame religion in the name of the nation on the one hand, and autonomous faith communities that assemble around informal structures and alternative sources of knowledge and authority on the other.

The findings presented herein suggest that Islam, as framed at the top-down political level, remains an important marker of identities, but that experiences of religiosity have increasingly become more personalized and individual in nature, detached from organized religion and official doctrinal prescriptions. Believers' expressions and practices of Islam after the fall of Communism are increasingly personal, mobile, weakly institutionalized, and collective mostly as a choice. This 'de-nationalization' and 'de-ethnization' of Islam does not necessarily entail a 'de-culturation,' but a recasting of the connection between religious, cultural and political markers. The result is the revival of Islam as a mere religion, not as a collective identity or organized structure of 'belonging'. At a more

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general level, this analysis of Islamic revival in the Balkans contributes to exploring timely and pertinent questions on the actors that speak for Islam, the role of foreign influences, the relationship between nation, state and faith, post-Communist patterns of religiosity, as well as traits of Islam in the broader European context.

Islam as a National/Ethnic Marker

Mainstream research on Islam in the Balkans, similarly to that concerning other denominations, is permeated by an implicit and sometimes explicit assumption that religion serves to shape and demarcate national/ethnic boundaries. Religion in general is reduced to an 'ethnic marker', a crucial and yet divisive source of national identity. As Creed notes, the scholarly privileging of ethno-national identities, at the expense of local identities and localized forms of knowledge and practice, represents an 'example of Balkanism par excellence' (2011, 168). Insistence upon the role of religion in confining communal identities is particularly related to the march of national ideologies and the vicissitudes of state- and nation-building processes along a historical course of imbroglio and conflict between diverse ethnic and religious groups in these parts of the world.

The enmeshment, and often subjugation, of religion to politics of national identity became especially pronounced during the violent collapse of Yugoslavia. The political entities that resulted from the dissolution of the federal state structure all claimed to represent a dominant ethnic group identified with a specific religion, by effectively managing a transformation process that Verdery has called the 'extermination of alternative identity choices' (1994, 38). However, it was the appalling bloodshed in Bosnia-Herzegovina that brought world-wide attention to Muslim populations, their ethnic allegiances and nation- and state-formation processes in Southeastern Europe. As Poulton and Taji-Farouki put it, 'the Bosnian tragedy has made very clear the importance of examining the relationship between the Balkan Muslim communities and the states in which they live' (1997, 1). Then came Kosovo, another case of political conflict that developed along ethno-religious lines, namely between Muslim Albanians and Orthodox Serbs. Subsequently, conflicts in Macedonia drew new attention to divisions between Orthodox Macedonians and Muslim Albanians, both barricading themselves into opposing 'ethno-religious' fronts. The battles for state authority, power, territory, and independent statehood in the 1990s, all made use of religious symbols as crucial instruments for the reconstruction of the national 'self' against the opposing 'other' (Duijzings 2000, 157). All the while, churches and mosques became the major targets of destruction and embodied the emerging divisions.

For many, these events recalled a historical process of ethno-religious imbroglio among and between the states that carved their independent statehood out of former Ottoman territories in the Balkans. Centuries of Ottoman rule, and its *millet* system of organization, whereby religion was used to define separate identities, nurtured a strong sense of in-group belonging, determined almost exclusively by religion (Poulton and Taji-Farouki 1997). The weakening of the Empire in the 19th paved the way for competing European concepts of modern state organization and authority. But even where religious divisions were eroded by competing sources of identification, institutional legacies, group allegiances and daily practices at the local level helped to preserve a sense of distinct faith-based communities, which continued to separate and undermine the aspiring national units.

In the age of nation- and state-building, these distinguishable communal identities were promoted, manipulated and usurped by political schemers of all sorts in order to demarcate their new nations, engineer homogeneity, consolidate central state authority, reconfigure borders, and, when necessary, wage wars against 'others'. Modern state-making presses its subjects towards single identities: one cannot keep track of people who choose to be one thing at one point and something else at another. In the Balkans, similar to the 'construction' of ethno-national identities in Western Europe, 'the self-consistent person who "has" one "identity" is the product of a specific historical process: modern nation-state formation' (Verdery 1994, 37). In this process, religion was taken out of the hands of the believers and subjected to various state ideologies and political projects – secularism, patriotism,

ethnic mobilization, national unity and centralized state authority – which had very little to do with faith itself. Indeed, attempts by political 'entrepreneurs', but also by centers of religious power, to agitate for the eradication of elements of blend and mixture were livelier in border and composite areas, where ethnic and national loyalties remained the most fluid (Duijzings 2000).

Islam, which enjoyed particular social and legal advantages during the centuries of *Pax Ottomana*, became the very backbone of political engineering during the processes of 're-imaging' national regimes that spun out of the dissolution of the Empire. The predominantly Christian-Orthodox Balkan states that gained independence in the period from 1829 to 1878 – Serbia, Greece, Romania, Montenegro, Bulgaria and Bosnia – all identified themselves with the orthodox 'millet' in order to consolidate their newly-won statehood (Poulton and Taji-Farouki 1997, 25). Albania, which inherited a mixed religious population, could not clothe nationalism with a single creed, but attempted to promote the heterodox Bektashi order as the main religious pillar of an 'ecumenical' nation (Clayer 2008). Regardless of their composition, however, all the post-Ottoman Balkan states targeted their Muslim populations as a leftover of the Ottoman past, almost a traitor in the midst of their nations in the making (Katsikas 2009, 539). Such nation- and state-building strategies informed a wide range of anti-Muslim policies: foreigners to be expelled; stigmatization *vis-à-vis* the dominant ethno-religious group; measures of homogenization; and, at best toleration as separate ethno-religious groups. Muslim communities, for their part, had to carve a new place for themselves amidst non-Muslim societies, exclusive nation-building projects, antagonistic policies, and shifting fortunes of the European geopolitical order.

The State-Organized Religious 'Field': Continuous Legacies, Static Categories and Transmission Mechanisms

Re-awakened nationalisms of the 1990s, and new politics of identity and statehood, which were certainly suffused with old ethno-religious symbolisms, informed similar readings of Islam also after the fall of Communism. To quote the findings of a recent study, 'the interpretation of … Muslim politics as trapped in the politics of identity and inter-communal ethno-religious nationalism prevails in the media, political debates and international community's projects as well as in academic discourses' (Henig and Bielenin-Lenczowska 2013, 2). Violence played a crucial role in solidifying exclusivist national projects: 'it makes reality resemble the ideological constructs that underpin the violence' (Duijzings 2000, 33). Hence, during and for some time after the Balkan conflicts, the analysis of the Islamic phenomena was left at the tender mercy of nationalism and post-conflict studies, which re-interpreted religion in line with ethno-religious splits and static national categories.

The inbuilt divisions also carried the active contribution of political elites to 'nationalize' but also 'centralize' and 'manage' newborn Islamic impulses within the unitary frame of the state authority. Policies of *nationalization*-cum-*etatization* of Islam often served worldly interests of subjecting religion to the service of concrete political projects and agendas (Hann and Pelkmans 2009, 1520). All modern states maintain boundaries by mastering criteria for inclusion and exclusion, but this was especially pertinent in light of the centralized legacy of the post-Communist state apparatus. Former Communist regimes had built up a highly centralized machinery to appropriate and control all spheres of life, including public religions and intimate spheres of personal piety. Succeeding post-Communist entities capitalized on the power of the state machinery to construct, select and also use religious symbols as an anchor of political legitimacy. Institutionally, the state continued to monitor nations' religious life by preserving a multi-tiered system of registration, screening and controls (Stan and Turcescu 2011). Although the management of Islam depended upon the demographic and historical particularities of each entity, the use of states' muscles to discipline it remained the same. Communist-style centralization and modernization thus bequeathed vestiges of largely interventionist and occasionally hostile state policies to the post-Communist institutional models of managing Islam.

At the same time, some of the Communist ideological templates could spill over into post-Communist arrangements to 'check Islam at the door' of the succeeding nation-states. Former state intelligentsias – historians, linguists, ethnographers, writers, artists and students of Marxist ideology – supported by an overstaffed academy and generously funded by the Communist regime worked as active transmission mechanisms of former Communist ideas. The previous regime prepared and made use of state intelligentsias in order to articulate the nation's 'heritage', complete with a pantheon of great thinkers, artists, writers and heroes. After the regime change in the 1990s, these intellectuals took up key positions in the new machinery of the reproduction of knowledge –education ministries, academic institutions, universities and publishing outlets – generating what Gellner has dubbed the 'diffusion of a school-mediated, academy supervised [national] idiom' (1983, 140). In the new spectrum of revived nationalisms, Muslims were commonly seen as some kind of ethnic 'fifth column', remnants of a bygone era, which could never be integrated successfully into the planned homogenous, modern, European, and often exclusively Orthodox nation-states. Consequently, any expressions of Islam had to be oppressed, kept out of the public realm or placed under state surveillance. Such accounts of nations' 'heritage' and related versions of history enforced stagnant parameters on how the nation, state and Islam merged and parted ways in the collective official memory of each political entity.

Government-sponsored 'official' Islam – an organizational concept, which refers to the creation of centralized religious hierarchies approved by the state – serves as yet another powerful interlocutor of transmitting politically-conceived top-down national accounts of Islam (Bringa 1995, 199; Oktem 2011, 162-3). Headed by a Chief Mufti, governed by formal statutes, and supported and monitored by the state, central hierarchies are acknowledged as the sole authority governing the respective 'national' community of believers all across the Balkans. Even where pragmatic interests or ideological rifts divided official Islamic structures, the post-Communist state made sure to remedy the problems and affirm its selected interlocutors. The official hierarchy, in return, helped to establish state oversight over the community of believers and to cleanse 'undesirable' influences (Ghodsee 2010, 19; Elbasani 2015). By offering particular benefits and co-opting the Islamic 'establishment', the post-Communist states continued to maintain an intricate relationship between political and Islamic structures – the sovereign has the prerogative of control and intervention, *Ulamas* are domesticated, religious ideas tamed, and scholarship corrected. Central structures are consequently relegated to a subordinate political role, remarkable for their support of government policies.

It is through this coalition of 'the powerful', supported by the backing of state institutions, that top-down political constructs of nation, history, past and present are perpetrated and reinforced in each country. These structures necessarily maintain and reproduce inflexible 'boundary-drawing' categories on and within Islam itself. All the while, believers' recovery of piety and observance, as well as referents of faith, is filtered through the ethno-national categories that nourish the state-organized religious 'fields'.

New Encounters of Faith: Believers, Choices and Diversity

The assumption of clear-cut ethno-religious identities and functions, which frame the politically regulated religious 'field', however, represents a straitjacket for the purpose of exploring believers' manifold discoveries of faith after Communism. The top-down assignment of uniform collective identities and terms of belonging in the process of nation-states' imposed uniformity is one account of the post-Communist trajectory of faith. Another account is believers' own individual searches and pursuits of various 'identities' on offer during the opening up of the religious space. The two levels are interrelated. Believers respond to the broad socio-political currents, which affect their personal and communal lives. Enrolment within communal boundaries becomes particularly strong during radical periods of war, violence and religious marginalization, which force believers to choose where they belong and to stick together.

Still, the faithful are active agents with the capacity to choose and reinvent the ethno-national classificatory systems within which they manoeuvre. Rituals and living practices often function as a means of de-authorising hegemonic 'national' perspectives that privilege selected memories and collective identities (Creed 2011). Believers, moreover, encounter different sources of identification, and actively select and weigh the value of each according to the surrounding circumstances and personal experiences. Mixed 'identities' are frequent, particularly in peripheral settings where ecclesiastical organizations and state institutions are less powerful in terms of how they reach and determine believers' preferences. Hence, the more one moves out of and away from centrally controlled religious machinery, the more one observes Muslim 'anomalies' – ethno-religious fusion, heterodox practices, cultural diffusion and plural forms of belonging and believing (Bringa 1995; Ghodsee 2010; Henig and Bielenin-Lenczowska 2013). As Duijzings puts it: 'there is always friction between the ideal ethno-religious models or ideologies produced by states and religious regimes, and the social reality to which they refer' (2000, 25). Seen from the autonomous spaces of believers' choices, practice and piety, 'being Muslim' takes multiple forms across different localities and moments of transition.

The post-Communist open market of religiosity has further expanded the scope of 'identity' offers available to Muslim believers. At least three crucial developments here – namely 1) the phenomena of post-socialist secularization; 2) incoming international influences; and 3) the 'EU-ization' of the religious sphere – contribute to challenging and reconfiguring the one-size-fits-all ethno-national formulas into which Muslims are commonly squeezed. These breaks in the organized religious field confront Muslim believers with different, sometimes contradictory and sometimes competing sources of influence, both internal and foreign, regional and global, formal and informal, secular and sacred.

The Imprint of Secularization

The Communist-style modernization, and the eviction of religion from the public arena, has contributed to a certain 'secularization of Balkan societies' and 'a sharp decline in religious practice' (Bougarel 2005, 11). Region-wide polls show that an absolute majority of people declare that they believe in God and belong to one of the religious communities, but much fewer attend communal services or enroll in established structures (University of Oslo 2011). Specific data on Muslims similarly shows that the majority prefer to attend only important ceremonies at poignant moments in life such as birth, wedding and funerals. Muslim believers also appear strongly committed in confining religion to the private sphere – away from institutions, schools, arts and the public sphere more generally (ibid; Oktem 2011). Even when the struggle for nation and statehood strengthened Muslims' identification with the core ethno-national group, their allegiances did not result in a holistic Islamization of their identities, be it in the sense of uniform practices, regular attendance of communal services, discovery of a global religious *Umma*, and/or unquestioned loyalty to the doctrine of the organized religious establishment.

International Influences

Another trend, which destabilizes the nationally-organized religious field, and surfs the wave of de-institutionalized religious choices, come with the intrusion of various external influences in the porous institutional order that characterized the collapse of Communism. The liberalization of religious conduct and the opening of new channels of communication with the world allowed for the creation of a vivid and competitive 'marketplace', where foreign actors, structures and ideas – missionaries, migrants, students from abroad, humanitarian organizations and virtual Internet networks – compete with established institutions and national ideologies for market 'shares' (Elbasani 2015; Tziampiris 2009; Karcic 2010). Cash-rich Saudi organizations, but also a myriad of other Middle Eastern and Turkish organizations, targeted Muslim communities in the Balkans in order to win post-atheist souls and gain a foothold in the midst of Europe. Well-funded Islamic networks provided necessary

financial resources for the recovery of faith: funds for the re-building of infrastructure, scholarships for students abroad, foreign literature, local translations, a multitude of religious missionaries, education networks, and expansive humanitarian assistance mixed with proselytization activities. Some of those associations also insisted upon propagating an Islamic message clean of local cultural 'impurities'. Foreign movements and their messages managed to infiltrate the central institutions, made inroads amongst the uprooted and the poor, attracted groups suffering the hardship of economic collapse, and preached a message of equality and justice amidst the corrupt post-Communist political order (Ghodsee 2010). Yet, the paradoxes and dilemmas that came with different global movements and their interpretations of Islam seemingly pushed local communities to select most convincing ideas and take ownership of their own way of living and practicing faith (Karic 2002; Elbasani 2015).

The Europeanization of the Religious Space

A third factor, which disrupts and reconfigures the organised religious field, is Muslims' access to a broader European institutional and normative space, now closely related to the ongoing processes of EU accession. The promise of EU membership to all countries in the Balkans left out of the previous enlargement brought them into closer contact with the European project, and exposed them to Europe-wide debates on what it is to be Muslim in contemporary Western Europe. EU-level debates, often intermingled with issues of enlargement fatigue, Christian heritage, problems of migration, issues of terrorism, and the uncertainty of Turkey's accession, add pressure on Muslim believers to position themselves along the indigenous side of 'European Islam'. The term reflects Muslims' long-term historical engagement with institutional templates and ideological frames emanating from the European continent (Clayer and Germain 2008). Yet, in the post-Communist era, the term 'European Muslim' is now employed to suggest their active support for the post-1989 project of 'return' to Europe and the concrete criteria of EU accession – democracy, the rule of law and market economy – with which candidate countries are required to comply (Elbasani 2013).

At the same time, Muslims perceive the EU-level institutions and equal rights of citizenship as an international layer of protection against restrictive national policies and ideologies (Elbasani and Saatçioğlu 2014). All across the Balkans, Muslims have discovered that the EU's democratic requirements expand the range of religious rights and claims that they can make in the public sphere (Ghodsee 2010, 177). Different Muslim associations and groups have mobilized the EU's norms and values associated with the highest standards of democracy – freedom of speech, opinion, conscience, property, and minority protection – to broaden their claims in the domestic arena.

Alternative Discoveries of God

The post-Communist 'disruptions' of the religious field have unleashed a myriad of new actors with various solutions and alternatives concerning the revival of faith: 1) state authorities, 2) official Islamic institutions, and 3) local actors including lay believers and informal authorities. It all depends on who speaks for Islam.

Protective Nationalisms: Extolling Endogenous versus Foreign Islam

State authorities and official Islamic institutions often ally together to protect the official traditional line and consequently portray competing forms of revival of faith as 'foreign' and alien to the ideas of national identity, thus antagonizing many 'born-again' Muslims. Ambivalence towards Islam is a recurrent and structurally inbuilt feature of old and new Balkan nationalisms, but it has reappeared in full force in the post-Communist re-imagination of the religious sphere. Balkan polities, at least at the macro-political level, continue to share the common assumption that Islam is a problematic leftover and the disputed 'other' amidst their European states in the making. Accordingly, Islam requires state

control and conjectural reformation in order to 'fit' the given ethno-religious composition of respective nation-states.

The political and academic entrepreneurs that 'guard' the nations also keep defining the borders of acceptable 'traditional' Islam(s), typically framed in the context of a nation's cultural and historical particularities. Expressions of faith that do not fit into this 'fabric' are exposed to misnomers ranging from enemies of the nation to remnants of a bygone era, to odious renegades and foreign agents. The bifurcation between 'ours' and 'theirs', local and foreign, national and global, and ultimately, good and bad Islam(s) capitalizes on nation-based categories. Accordingly, national traditional Islam is portrayed as a 'moderate' – liberal, tolerant, indigenous and European version, whereas global or foreign Islam is perceived as alien, fundamentalist, and possibly intolerant and radical. Traditional Islam, moreover, is presented as being 'embedded' within a local culture, which borrows syncretic elements from other religions such as Bektashism, Sufism and local folk traditions (Roy 2015).

Within the exclusive nationalist accounts, the revival of Islam and changes in religious practices and beliefs are often linked to foreign influences that penetrated the Balkans after the post-Communist liberalization of religious conduct in the 1990s. In Albania, mainstream public intellectuals problematize the revival of Islamic practices by employing orientalist stereotypes that juxtapose Albanians' broad brush religious-free European identity with the imported 'backward' trends of Islam (Sulstarova 2015). The 'pronounced' forms of religious practices are commonly exteriorized. As one of Tošić's informants puts it, 'this is foreign to us. It comes from Saudi Arabia and there is money involved! We are Europeans. We do not need this here!' (2015). The contrast between local European strains of Islam and imported extremist currents sparks intensive debates on revival of Islam also in Bosnia (Mesarič 2015). Here, Salafism and its expressions are similarly deemed as practices 'incompatible with Bosnian-cum-European culture'. In the same vein of argument, Olson's ethnographic work in Bulgaria suggests that both the government and the media propagate the Orientalist myth that 'Islamic revival has been imported wholesale from the Middle East, through the efforts of Arab organizations with ties to terrorism' (2015). By 'externalizing' the revival of Islam, Balkan states look down upon newly practicing Muslims as some kind of 'imported' or externally transplanted faith community, which undermines the 'endogenous' traditional features of the nation established over centuries (Roy 2015).

Foreign Islamic movements, for their part, are also divided into two main trends namely: 1) Salafism, either in an institutional form, largely sponsored by Saudi Arabia, or in a de-institutionalized form, driven by informal networks, including individual imams and militant missionaries; and 2) the neo-Ottoman model, sponsored by Turkish official state structures (*Diyanet*) or non-official institutions such as the Gülen networks. These 'interferences' play out at the macro-political level and manifest themselves in the grandiose form of national identity, 'threats', but also regional shifts of power and clashes of civilization. Salafi religious predicators and missionaries, militant NGOs (Gülen schools), or cultural or religious activities sponsored by foreign states (TİKA for Turkey, or the OIC), are seen as reinforcing the already existing ethno-religious divides and reshaping them into a geo-strategic, regional, and broad civilizational confrontation (Roy 2015). Accordingly, not only the unity of the nation, but European 'civilization' itself, is at stake. In the words of one of the Metropolitans of the Greek Orthodox Church,

> Asian peoples invade Europe threatening to alter the synthesis of its population. After that, the spirit of Islam and its traditions will dominate. Within a multicultural world the winner will be race, the population that will dominate over the other. Now, Muslims fight to dominate biologically and become a majority in Europe. The shrinking of the White World has been prepared. Unfortunately, Europe faces a serious situation. (Quoted in Sakellariou 2015)

Political and intellectual elites all across the Balkans have proved quite receptive of the thesis of a 'civilizational' divide between the East and the West, and the contested role of Islam in its midst. Highly acclaimed intellectuals in Albania, for example, all ponder on the obstacles that Islam poses in their country's path towards Europe and frame the issue as a choice between East and West

(Sulstarova 2015). In Kosovo too, political elites seek to distance the fragile state structure from any identification with the Islamic majority by downplaying its institutions and symbols (Mehmeti 2015). Both countries have devised a similar policy of 'detaching' Islam from the aspired 'European' national identity and the consensual Post-Communist political project of a 'return' to Europe.

The chains of transmission work top-down – political elites and state bureaucrats establish the broad institutional confines, intellectual circles supply suitable historical narratives, and official religious hierarchies diffuse the official line across their respective community of believers. Official Muslim organizations, each based near centres of political power in Sarajevo, Prishtina, Tirana, Skopje, Sofia and so on, maintain organizational devices – the faculty of Islamic Studies, a network of Madrasas, as well as intellectual, publication and humanitarian activity nets – that distribute the national/traditional vision of Islam. The central hierarchies, moreover, paradoxically support a strong separation of 'Church' and State, indeed a fundamental feature of 'traditional' Islam(s) across the Balkans. The Islamic Community in Bosnia, for example, ascribes to itself the role of protecting and following the Islamic tradition of the Bosniaks. A resolution passed in 2006 obliges the community to protect 'the authenticity of the centuries old tradition,' and requires imams to take account of the 'Bosnian tradition' when interpreting Islam (Mesarič 2015). The Grand Mufti and his representatives in Bulgaria follow a similar line of Islam that is strongly rooted in the fabric of Bulgarian local culture and European 'belonging' (Olson 2015). Pursuing the 'tradition' is also the foremost goal of the Central Sunni Organization in Albania, which describes itself as an 'engine in the promotion of highest Islamic and patriotic values' while pledging to 'develop a feeling of love and faithfulness for the religion and the Fatherland' (Endresen 2015). Concurrently with the political project and its European orientation, the Albanian Muslim hierarchy describes the country as one of a 'Muslim majority', but with a 'Western spirit', a 'Western vocation' and 'Western ethnic origins' (Ibid.).

Believers' Choices and Communities of Faith

Opposing local traditional Islam to foreign Islam, however, misses the emerging reconfigurations and the in-situ evolution of autonomous 'faith communities', where members of the ethno-national groups or sub-groups endeavour to build a community of believers within a larger group of 'cultural Muslims'. Most believers understand Islam as a religion and not as a culture; they are local pious people who organize meetings, prayers and classes without seeking any form of institutionalisation or authority (Roy 2015). They do not necessarily reject the concept of local Muslim culture, they do not consider less observant neighbours as 'infidels', they just want to 'purify' and specify the religious norms. They want to define a religious attitude towards the world that does not consist of merely 'belonging' to a cultural group, but rather of freely incorporating religious norms and values into their daily life and practice.

Funk's analysis of Friday prayer and the wearing of the hijab in Bosnia show that believers frequently avail to their right of choice. As one of her interlocutors puts it 'in Bosnia nothing seems to be *farz*, an obligation by God... we somehow choose everything. It is an obligation but we do it as our free choice' (Funk 2015). Believers' resort to choice is particularly visible in the donning of the hijab. Olson's study of informal teachers of Islam in Bulgarian villages shows that some of them advocate individual choice:

> Everyone has the right to choose. A girl who dresses like that [in dark colors] is saying, 'I want to dress like this!' Do you understand? But there are very modern [Muslim girls, women] – they put on a headscarf, they wear pants and for example a tight shirt, which absolutely is not a problem. (Olson 2015)

The younger generation of covered women in Bosnia has indeed been quite innovative in wearing the hijab and showing that veiled women 'can be nicely and fashionably dressed' (Mesarič 2015). Where believers are deprived of the right to wear the headscarf, as in the case of Kosovo, they consider it a matter of individual and religious freedom and urge their elites to look 'to Europe and the rights

enjoyed by Muslims there' (Sadriu 2015). The reverse, however, can also be true in the discourse of Imams that propagate for the 'purification' of Islam from local influences. As a Saudi-educated Imam in Bulgaria instructs his followers, the 'West' uses different ways to 'ruin' Muslim women:

> Television (especially soap operas and advertisements which showed partially naked women); education (especially sending one's daughter abroad to study); celebration of 'others' holidays' in school (such as Christmas); graduation ceremonies; promotion of 'ruined women' (pop singers) as the 'stars of Bulgaria' (a marketing campaign by one of Bulgaria's most prominent music labels, Payner); and beauty parlors. (Olson 2015)

This variety of actors are not insulated bearers of tradition and national ideologies: they have access to the Internet and to international publications; they might go abroad to study, or make pilgrimages, attend conferences, follow online sermons and fatwas, et cetera. They also assemble into pious communities that strive for a fusion between religion and rights, faith and identity, practices and knowledge. Their array of personal choices develops at the intersection between national traditions, newly-won freedoms, global influences and access to European institutions and rights. Channels of communication with the world allow Muslim leaders and their constituents to 'learn' Islam in an open and personal way using top-down vertical but also horizontal social networks of transmission. The Internet, particularly, represents a conventional, easy-to-use, tool for them to access new sources of information and knowledge. As a believer, who considers himself in the process of 'learning' assesses: 'With the opening of Albania, also the religion came here … you accept and step by step you may arrive at some point, … we are learning the religion at the moment, we are at the start of learning.' (Tošić 2015). The expansion of piety movements which are embracing a new kind of Islamic knowledge and experience demonstrates that believers rely on non-traditional channels – informal meetings, multiple authorities and alternative sources including open debates as much as authenticated textual sources – to learn about Islam (Olson 2015; Mesarič 2015). In the context of the open and competitive market of religiosity, believers seek new knowledge and sources of information. As a pious Muslim women from Bosnia puts it: ' If you want to learn about Islam at the mosque, the hodža (imam) will only speak to you during Ramadan, and if he happens to be ill, not even then. And on top of that, he repeats the same thing every year. …I want more.' (Mesarič 2015)

It is usually through new non-official channels of learning that believers can discover Islam beyond official traditional dogmas and broad frames of nationally organized religious fields. Tradition as a collection of local beliefs and customs that is shared across generations, however, is sticky and remains a crucial point of reference through which believers make sense of the incoming ideas and alternative sources of knowledge. As a study on marriage preferences among Macedonian speaking Muslims shows, they tend to consider outsiders as 'different from our Muslims, having different culture, customs and tradition.' (Zadrożna 2015). Local culture, and what it connotes for family models and gender roles, accordingly, determines Muslims' crucial life choices such as marriage and love relations, even if they tend to venture into illicit romances when living abroad. The study of forms of pilgrimage and the cults of saints among Muslim Roma communities similarly shows the stickiness of tradition, which combines a layer of pre-existing Islamic rites, Sufi practices and popular beliefs (Trofimova 2015). Such rituals survive and get a life of their own even if they stand in stark contrast to the teachings of the official Islamic hierarchies, which for their part strive to free the local habitus from 'elements of ignorance and innovation.' (Ibid.)

Whereas communities of the faithful diffract from traditional knowledge supplied by official organizations, they also screen, select and resist non-official sources of religious knowledge and practice. Not all knowledge, ideas, and missionary activities and networks that permeated the Balkans during the post-Communist openings are similarly welcomed by local populations. To paraphrase the concerns of a Muslim believer from Bosnia:

> In the war and after the war, a lot of people started to go to mosque or to church here. The "need for God" was on such a high level. In [those]… extreme conditions and dangerous circumstances, after a sort of atheistic communism, it is very normal to try to find an "exit" in religion/s. … I was

> just afraid that my good friend… [would accept] an extreme… interpretation of Islam….' (Funk 2015).

Resistance against radical movements and doctrines has been the main thread of centralized hierarchies' advocacy of traditional knowledge and their monopoly of knowledge. Yet, Salafi and other radical forms of Islamism have achieved limited gains also amongst lay believers and autonomous communities that resort to ideas different from the traditionally-packaged ones (Bougarel 2005). Both official hierarchies and decentralized communities of the faithful have seemingly resorted to different aspects of 'tradition' – the body of institutional solutions, arguments and practices inherited from the past – to juxtapose radical projects and re-cast Islam in line with new democratic and European aspirations of their post-Communist polities (Elbasani 2015).

The diffracted picture of Islamic actors and alternatives shows that the contemporary religious 'breaks' in the organized religious fields inform the development of more personalized and individual attitudes towards religion and organised official schemes. In the context of the open market of religiosity, the Islamic 'community' appears scattered, heterogeneous and not particularly concerned with unifying itself or even being represented (Roy 2007, 68-9). Newfound religiosities involve autonomous 'pick and choose' discoveries of faith. Although lay Muslims operate and locate themselves within the familiar tradition, much as their official counterparts, they also keep learning faith from alternative sources and channels of information. All the while, the Islamic phenomenon is no longer only the bearer of ethno-national alternatives and politically assigned prescriptions, but also the symptom of new spaces that cannot be confined within a particular state, nation territory, or ethnicity.

Conclusions

This article investigated the variety of actors that speak for Islam and their alternatives in the context of the open market of religion, and contemporary disruptions of organized religious 'fields', across the post-Communist Balkans. In particular, the article shifted the analytical focus from the top-down dominant macro-political debates that connect nation, state and religion to the multitude of Muslim actors, their choices and alternative expressions of faith. Similarly to other cases and contexts, revived post-Communist believers seek to define a religious attitude towards the world and endeavour to recast Islam beyond traditional dogmas or official suppliers of knowledge. Muslims' discovery of faith amidst alternative channels and sources of knowledge has contributed to recasting the relationship between nation, state and faith. It has also reconfigured, and in a way detached, the close links between *religion* – as a coherent corpus of beliefs managed by a body of legitimate holders of knowledge – and *religiosity* as individual believers' own formulations and experiences of faith (Roy 2007, 7-8).

Our analysis of the revival of Islam in the Balkans shows a clear bifurcation between state-organized religion with its own actors, ideas and mechanisms of diffusion on the one hand; and believers' autonomous choices, experiences and congregation into pious communities on the other. State authorities and religious hierarchies responsible for 'guarding' the nation and its underlying traditions, for their part, extoll the differences between 'good' traditional or cultural Islam and 'bad' pronounced foreign imports. They continue to perform checks of 'authentic' and 'genuine' Islamic traditions in the interest of nations' homogeneity and precise criteria for inclusion and exclusion. From an official perspective, the revival of Islam is read through 'our' tradition and is seen as reinforcing identity, even civilizational, conflicts between the national 'us' and incoming 'others'. Lay believers, for their part, seemingly congregate into autonomous groups that strive to discover and practice Islam as faith, and not as culture, tradition, or an ethno-religious collective category. They avail of their freedom of choice and benefit from new channels of information as well as familiar traditional sources and practices, in taking ownership of their own 'ways' of being Muslim. Hence, Islam, as framed at the top-down political level, remains an important marker of identities, but the experience of

religiosity has increasingly become a more personalized individual attitude, detached from official structures and prescriptions. If there is a common finding amongst the alternative routes to religiosity explained here, it is that believers' practice and pursuit of Islam are increasingly personalized, mobile, weakly institutionalized, and collective as a choice.

The 'de-nationalization' and 'de-ethnization' of Islam does not necessarily entail 'de-culturation,' but rather the recasting of the connection between religious, cultural and political markers; it opens up the 'religious sphere', by making faith a choice, a set of personal beliefs distinct from the traditional body of knowledge (Roy 2015). If there is any 'religious revival,' moreover, it is not working in favour of any kind of pan-Islamism or even uniform religious revival. It simply contributes to making religion more autonomous politically, institutionally and ideologically. The result is the recasting of Islam as a religion, not as a collective and organized structure of 'belonging'. Overall, our analysis suggests the articulation of different pathways to God and maps the array of local actors and mechanism that reconstitute the presumed link between nation, state and Islam in the post-Communist era. At a more general level, these findings contribute to broader and timely theoretical questions on the actors that speak for Islam, the role of foreign influences, the dynamic relationship between nation, state and faith, the post-Communist forms of religiosities, as well as the traits of Islam in the larger European context.

What is interesting, and in need of further research here, is to explore why both the political guardians of the nation and pious believers across the Balkans make use of similar traditional sources and embrace local solutions when recasting Islam. Political elites, intellectuals and lay Muslims in the region have long sought answers on the most appropriate forms of organization, articulation and public expressions of Islam in the context of modern and secular European 'civilization'. However, future research needs to further inquire into how inherited solutions, arguments and practices inform believers' screening of the different alternatives on offer across different countries and contexts.

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