WHOSE IDENTITY?

RETHINKING ISLAM IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTHEAST EUROPE

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ABSTRACT

The socio-political heredity of the long-term presence of Islam in Southeast Europe deserves to be questioned in the light of today's climate of suspicion and heightened tensions toward autochthonous Muslims within the region and beyond. This brief paper focuses on Max Weber's neologism "sultanism" related to the religious legacy that Ottoman rules left behind in the Balkan Peninsula, which symbolises a counter-narrative in academia, in order to address a yet another issue regarding the interfaith coexistence among Balkan populations and history-related aspects. This paper then, too, seeks to unravel contemporary shades of Balkan Islam by pointing out how such religious identity has come to represent a communitarian set of everyday rules of practices rather than a pristine faith. Lastly, the employment of the term "idiosyncratic identity" will serve to shed light on volatility of Balkan Islam over which a hostile language toward Muslim communities is nowadays winning ground.

Keywords: Sultanism, Balkan Islam, Minority Groups, Identity, Manipulation;

1. Introduction

In the contemporary climate of suspicion against Muslim communities, detailed political and cultural analyses on potential radicalisation of jihadist-oriented groups polarise an utterly different dichotomy of opinion between those who consider Islam a threat for the public realm and those who insist that Islam *per se* does not represent a cultural barrier for a sustainable multicultural society. Interestingly enough, while this dichotomy has epitomised Islam for many European-born Muslims, in Southeast Europe it has replaced the Communism-religion standoff in the post-Cold War era. Decades onwards the dissolution of the so called Eastern Bloc, while political and economic externalities have garnered greater attention than religion-related issues over identity (trans-)formation in the Balkans, the cultural confrontation over the Islamic legacy and the "return to Europe" have become centrally paramount among those newly independent former Yugoslavian and Communist Republics. Within this, external factors such as the rise of global pro-jihadi ideological organisations (e.g., Islamic State, al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, al-Shabeb) have impinged on Islam through process of confessional reconstructions. Contrary to West Europe where Muslims are ethnic minority members who increased social tensions in the second half of the twentieth century due to migratory phenomena from post-colonial Africa, Middle East and Central Asia, Southeast Europe has remained "homeland" for a large number of autochthonous Muslim communities. Yet despite all the criticism, it has also become fashionable to speculate and argue about statements such as "Islam is a religion of peace" or "Islam is a religion of war", which continue to be both too general and meaningless for the whole spectrum of Islam. In Southeast Europe, neither a specific group nor a certain organisation can claim a pristine Islam on behalf of its peaceful or violent message (Frog and Orr-Ewing, 2002) due to an institutional vacuum through which Islam has historically survived.

Because of that, this paper seeks to offer an overall exploration of religious identity of Balkan Islam in order to shed light on a wealth of interwoven factors that are currently misleading the notion of Islam itself within the region of Southeast Europe. In order to do so, this paper is not concerned with the societal role of ethnic minority groups over the political spectrum, nor with the pro-jihadi message that media discourse have overwhelmingly used to report phenomena of radicalisation and disloyal behaviour from within the region, such as in Bosnia, Albania or Kosovo. Rather, this paper is concerned with an attempt to re-define the notion of Balkan Islam through an interdisciplinary approach that aims to:

a) analyse briefly the Balkan Islam by overlapping its Ottoman legacy in the so called "European Turkey" - namely all States emerged from of the Ottoman domination, e.g., Albania, Bulgaria, Kosovo-Serbia, Macedonia -, and majority-minority identity relations;

b) look beyond the ghost of the former Ottoman realm haunting the substantial Muslim population by taking into account Max Weber's "sultanism". This is employed here to underpin how a set of strategic military rules and high level of taxation were narrowly maximised to take control over the Empire territory rather than forcedly imposing a newly defined branch of religious State. Hence, this historical reference shall unravel how literature, conflicting memory and ethnically defined stereotypes have unilaterally shaped a pathological desire for revenge against "the Turks", letting a vivid form of banal nationalism raise in Bulgaria, Serbia and Greece, among others;

c) introduce the theoretical approach of concentric circles by which Maajid Nawas frames the Islamic groups worldwide in the attempt to point out an idiosyncratic form of Balkan Islam and open up a further debate about Europe's religious future in the perspective of the Western Balkans accession to the European Union. In this regard, I employ the term "idiosyncratic" in accordance with its literally Greek origin: *idiosunkrasia*, explaining its trifold meaning to the sphere of Islam. i. *idios* – "own" or "private" – which brings to light a self-identification with Islam among Balkan Muslims that is acquired in the private sphere, e.g., family, madrasas, mosques, ethnic political parties and so forth; ii. *sun* – "with" – namely the "bridge" with all below-described aspects of Balkan Muslim population; iii. *krasis* – "mixture" – which comes to lay out a wide range of cultural, linguistic, ethnic, historical and political facets of today's form of Islam in Southeast Europe.

In conclusion, this paper shall briefly unravel to what extent such newly (re-)shaped form of "idiosyncratic Islam" may turn its traditional societal role in the Balkans into controversy that can potentially permit radical outsiders and their pro-jihadi demands to manipulate Muslim communities through an overwhelming rhetoric. The theoretical framework shall open up the question whether Balkan Muslims can take for granted such (under-)development of Islam in the spirit of its time, or, on the contrary, whether they perceive a risk for their theology in practice (Frog and Orr-Ewing 2002, 75) far from that traditional Islam around which previous generations have peacefully gathered in Southeast Europe.

2. Balkan Islam through History

According to the historical and socio-political (under-)development of Islam across the Balkan region, attempts to unravel communitarian identity of Balkan Muslims cannot take for granted the

much-discussed and externally imposed negative discourse that has survived and nowadays flourishes in Western Europe. At the same time, a history of Islam in Europe cannot overlook the presence of Muslim groups in the Balkans (G. Shenk 2006, 20) in order to build up a counter-narrative in opposition to intense fear, hatred and negative attitudes towards Islam as a whole. In Southeast Europe, Islam-related issues and their definitions demand a greater precision and accuracy. Without any doubt, Islam began to shape Southeast Europe's religious milieus after the Ottoman conquest which, however, did not come to impose a forced conversation for non-Muslim populations throughout its long-presence. Perhaps not incidentally, this explains current Balkan Muslims' inclination toward Turkey as the only one country of reference to address over the Islamic world, as well as legitimate heir of the Ottoman heritage. Thus far, the so-called "European Turkey" began to label all successor States of the Ottoman Empire (e.g., Albania, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Macedonia, partially Southern Serbia) as members of a region where autochthonous groups (e.g., today's regional minorities) have firstly adopted Islam and kept its legacy after the demise of the Ottoman Turks.

At a time when analysts and commentators are unsure about Turkey's pivotal role of "contractor"[1] or of *ağabey* (e.g., "big brother" in Turkish language) and its future strategy to intervene on behalf of their Turkic ancestors to better leverage its journey to EU accession, a valuable contribution on Ankara's interests and influence over Southeast Europe is again twofold. On the one hand, the "Strategic Depth" elaborated by the former Prime Minister of the Republic of Turkey Ahmet Davutoğlu is considered a win-win instrument to succeed in the journey towards the EU integration. On the other hand, today's Ankara and Brussels relations seem to have fallen into a definitive blockade as a result of the 2016 Turkish coup d'état attempt and aftermaths of the military operations alongside the Turkish-Syrian border. In addition, it remains arguable that Kemalist and Islamic intelligentsia in Turkey would culturally understand the former Ottoman Rumelia as the place of the Turkish transition towards a universal modernity. In between, a hostile language against Muslims and Turkish communities is winning ground in Bulgaria (Emilova 2017, pp. 127-143), as well as lack of interethnic well-living in contested societies, such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo among others, are currently carving out an anti-Turkey historical narrative and growing sense of Islamophobia. The former, however, does not seem to be defeated by misleading affirmations such as Davutoğlu's address to Bulgarian Muslims with a proud shriek: *Yes, we are the new Ottomans* (Leview-Sawyer 2015, 110).

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[1] See More *The Balkans and The Middle East: Are They Mirroring Each Other?* published by The Patriarchate of Peć and University of Belgrade, Faculty of Security Studies, October 14-15, 2012.

Besides, a de-contextualised and not static time analysis on Islamic identity all over the Balkans - with the exception of Slovenia, Croatia and Romania -, opens up more intriguing questions. Do Balkan Muslims identify themselves with Turkey and the Ottoman heritage because of the Islamic faith? To what extend it is possible to consider Balkan Islam as a historically consequent phenomenon of the Ottoman experience? More importantly, to what kind of manipulations and reinterpretations Balkan Muslims have been exposed throughout regional de-territorialisation?

Similarly to Nicolò Machiavelli's affirmation on the essence of the Ottoman Empire, which was described as the *whole Monarchy of the Turks* […] *governed by one lord* [while] *the others are his servants* (N. Macchiavelli 1532, 34), today's reference to Islam among Balkan peoples has (unsurprisingly) maintained a negative allusion. Due to the rise of Balkan romantic nationalisms triggered before and after the anti-Ottoman battlegrounds at the end of the nineteen century, the (mis-)/conception regarding Islam began to increase an idea of "religion of the occupants" through real and perceived images of "slaughters", "slavery" and "poverty". Historically, such anti-Islam narrative began to take place after the Congress of Berlin in 1878 at first, when the Orthodox Church began its overwhelming campaign in defence of the European bulwark of Christendom and against the "Muslim occupants" in support of a "Christian common wealth" within the region. By drawing a divisive remark along Christian and non-Christian communities, Muslim people, mainly Turks, and those locals who forcedly and spontaneously converted to Islam (e.g., Slavs, Vlachos, Albanians and Bulgarians) were recognised as "Turks" even without proper evidence of their ethnicity and belongingness. A widespread anti-Turkic discourse aroused in the sphere of art, literature and politics accordingly, paving the way toward more detailed discussions on the cultural role and political usage of Islam as an instrument of power in the central regions of the Balkans and Anatolia.

In this regards, Max Weber defines the Ottoman Empire as a curious mixture of modern and patrimonial elements that decayed when they entrenched themselves at the expense of the modern ones (Shenk 2006, 7). In his argumentation, Weber tries to smoothly redefine the concept of Ottoman administration by using the term "sultanism" as a neologism to depict a set of strategic rules aimed at keeping control over an extremely extended territory through a narrow maximization of taxation and military state system. Within the Ottoman Empire, indeed, high level of taxation in tandem with a military state system, whose management was entrusted to the *sihapi* (e.g., Ottoman cavalry corps) and the *zaim* (e.g., military governor of the land tenure of Empire), were established to pursue financial and strategic advantages from the provinces of the Empire. In few words, both high taxation

and compulsory military service were a pure instrument of the master, namely of the Sultan, fully integrated to a reasonably consistent set of rules aimed at guaranteeing a good-neighbourly interethnic relations between Turkish-Ottoman settlers and Balkan locals, i.e., *komşu*, which literally means "neighbour" in Turkish language. However, the *devshirme* tax, also well-known as "blood tax", was a heart-breaking price to pay for non-Muslim families, in time recognised as one of the most repressive instruments of the Turkish Ottoman power against non-Islamic communities.

Despite everything, a conspicuous growth of conversations to Islam were registered throughout the Ottoman administration, mainly in the poorest rural area of the Kosovar millet, in which 70% of ethnic-Albanian dwellers got used to Turkish Ottoman heritage, in Bosnia and Southern Bulgaria. This is why Weber's "sultanism" seems to correctly describe a political system that allowed pluralism even though strongly centralised, and in the meantime, it recalls the Francis Fukuyama's idea about the power limitations that Ottoman central power faced by allowing confessional laws to pertain to personal and collective cases within each Millet. For instance, whether legal disputes and further trials were conducted in Ottoman courts according to the Sharia law for Muslim residents, equally Orthodox Christian institutions were allowed to apply their judicial standards in a wide range of legal cases, i.e., marriages, inheritance and so forth. Orthodox Patriarchs were indeed officially responsible in front of the Sultan for "their" people's behaviour within the Millets and even for themselves since they could get married and have children in accordance with the priestly form of nicholaism (Fukuyama 2011, 256). Therefore, both Weber's and Fukuyama's viewpoints strengthen the idea about an overall lack of direct implication of Islam as a dominant policy for keeping non-Muslim identities at check. Conversations to Islam were likely decided to avoid the payment of taxes as well as for politically oriented interests of non-Muslim élites to which Turkish Ottomans provided dominant positions in their outlying regions, mainly in Albania and Bosnia, in order to balance domestic affairs from within.

Thus, to put it simply, religion – no matter if Islam, Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism, or Judaism -, was only used as a yardstick to identify as individuals and collective groups within the Millet system.

At this point, Weber's "sultanism" has become highly arguable in academia. Stefan Pavlowitch associates the concept of millet system with "religion" indeed, instead of using "sultanism" or the

common translation related to topography, i.e., "province", "state" and so forth. In other words, religion per se did not interplay in terms of religious faith, whereas it was a relevant reference for a cultural and social norm of conduct within each millet. Similar to Pavlowitch, the political analyst and expert in Albanian affairs Miranda Vickers remarks that religion was one of the most important factors through which Turkish Ottomans established their concept of governance all across the empire (Vickers 1998, 19). In general, Islam was neither an imposition of something alien nor an instrument to promote and impose a new branch of religious State whose central power did not square local experiences and different heritages. While Weber's "sultanism" could serve to understand at least the reasons behind the Ottoman foreign policy and further long-term fiscal distress that weakened the administration prior to its definitive collapse, Islam does not offer a unique paradigm for how Ottoman Empire should be historically recollected. In fact, the Ottoman collapse in Southeast Europe was partially triggered by a series of antisocial behaviourisms and bandit revolts that Turkish-oriented and Islam-converted communities carried out, such as Albanians'. In addition, un-political Islam has predominantly challenged the positive quality of social interactions in mixed-religious localities, alike the large Turkish-style bazar of Baščaršija in Sarajevo, in which the identity formation along ethnic lines began within the Yugoslavian regime and brought the latter to implode and ending up in gross violation of human rights and ethnic cleansings.

Hence, it becomes even clearer that phenomena of "forced conversations" to Islam were not imposed on non-Muslim communities, and that Islam became part of a cultural and political rivalry between those élites prompt to manipulate collective identities in order to divide and rule in the vacuum left by Turkish Ottomans. For instance, the so-called "Albanian question", namely the Albanian issue regarding a communitarian claim over a (mother-)/land twice larger than today's recognized territory of the Republic of Albania, has never come to shape the Albanian religious consciousness. By contrary, a national awareness aroused among ethnic-Albanian peoples and took place on the basis of the sense of ethnic belongingness. The Albanian writer Pasko Vasa, whose call for all "Muslim, Catholic, Orthodox Christian Albanians, no matter where and no matter how many", remains in the history of Albanian literature, together with his term "Albanism", which he coined to lay out the religion of Albanians[2] and that gained popularity not only among Albanians. Yet another example in Bulgaria, Islamic identity has always misled the notion of Islam as it incorporates a mixture of Christian and Pagan elements together with Muslim lifeworld that Muslim communities have kept

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[2] See More *Albania and The Albanian Identities*, published by International Centre for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relation, 2000, Sofia.

together with a Bulgarian-speaking attitude and other folk traditions. Bulgarian Muslims have been historically misrecognised as "Turks", and the artificial attempt of the "Revival Process" (1984-1989), which the Communist regime set up to force Bulgaria's Turks to change names (Marinov 2017, 70-74) in order to convince them to have Bulgarian descendants who had been islamised by Ottomans, has shown the extended degree under which Islam has been threated. A continuous exposition to political manipulation and confessional reconstructions that have brought the majority of Bulgarian Muslims to currently live into a rocky marginalisation and exclusion from the core society, without a sufficient level of education and a decreasing proficiency of Bulgarian language. Almost four years onward the controversial case of the "Roma Radicals"[3] in Southern Bulgaria, the recent decision of the Local Council of Stara Zagora to "bulgarise" 838 place-names with a clearly Turkish or Arabic origin has not only inflamed a socio-political issue related to an endless debate in the post-Communist history of Bulgaria. In retrospect, such name-changing policy has given more credentials to a perception of fear and mistrust toward Muslims – no matter if refugees or autochthonous members of Muslim minorities -, which is currently salient within the public sphere.

However, Islam *per se* has never created an oasis of persistent hatred and violence as some continue to portray (Velikonja 2003), even though such religious identity has never succeed to build up an oasis of peace, tolerance, and comprehension between different ethnic groups on the Balkans. In this case, whether an overview on the Ottoman Empire brings "what really happened" to light and facilitate analyses on today's role of Balkan Islam, the essence of the *religious* is at stake. In retrospect, since Balkan Islam has historically comprised collective groups that belong neither to Arab nor to Middle Eastern origin, they are exposed to misleading reinterpretations of sacred texts, confessional reconstructions and political manipulations able to trigger perilous changes in the traditional branch of the Balkan Islam, that is, the Islamic Hanafi School. The Ottoman Empire's vacuum has been constantly replaced by different forms of practising and teaching, coming from Muslim-majority societies in Middle East, in which Islam remains tightly connected with national, ethic, moral and social values that are foreign to Balkan Muslims. In the past few years, externally religious reverberations have put "under fire" the traditional form of Islamic practicing in the Balkans, meanwhile weakening their volatile religious identity in a profound and grove identity crisis. This explains the diffusion of jihadi-propaganda of ultra-conservative and transnational religious-political

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[3]Stoilova Zornitsa. *The Roma and the Radicals: Bulgaria's Alleged ISIS Support Base*. Balkan Insight [Accessed 11/01/2016] Available at http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/the-roma-and-the-radicals-bulgaria-s-alleged-isis-support-base-01-10-2016-1#sthash.i0pOwSdR.dpuf.

Salafism[4] within Bulgarian Roma groups and the dissemination of Wahabbism in the Bosnian education system aimed at shaping a "new Muslim being" (Ajzenhamer, 2012).

3. A Balkan Muslim Community From Within

Within this, the socio-cultural and political role of Islam in the Balkan Peninsula is no longer easy to unravel. Perhaps not incidentally, a look at the bigger picture disentangles the notion of Balkan Islam from the current state of affairs as it shows "in-group loyalty" and an "out-group hostility" that manipulates the debate, leading it to catastrophic vision that anti-Islam movements convey in their description of Islam as a potentially staging ground for terrorism and disloyalty. In this case, I borrow the theoretical approach of concentric circles by which Maajid Nawas frames the Islamic groups on a world scale (Nawas and Harris, 2015, 17-20) in order to counter such mainstream discourse and projection.

In the Balkan region, in my opinion, the centre of each Muslim community (no matter if majority or minority within the country) is composed of the smallest, peripheral and first circle within which members may be externally influenced by jihadi-movements, such as Islamic State, al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, al-Shebab and so forth. Their incitements to war and interethnic enmity, which had found a fertile ground after the Balkan Wars in the 1990s, have been paramount for self-proclaimed Islamic State's continuous attempts to target Balkan Muslims and definitely turn a pathological hotspot into their "terrorist haven". Around this, there is another semi-peripheral and larger circle, the second one, in which Muslims are involved in Islam despite the fact that they appear less eager to kill on behalf of Allah and willing to be killed for Allah. Within this, while Muslims are more oriented towards following and supporting Islam financially, philosophically and morally, concepts such as secularism, democracy and reinterpretation of Qur'an appear an assault upon Islam and their collective identity. Among Muslim women who are part of this circle, for example, the result of the secularisation of Islam in the liberal society is seen through the negative picture of too many broken marriages, women left without the security of their men, and deteriorating relations between men and women (Frog and Orr-Ewing 2002, 65). In other words, the members of this second circle are not inclined to get their hands dirty for or on behalf of Allah. They follow styles of belief and practices that would not flourish under strict or puritanical regime even though they live in accordance with an old-fashioned Islamic

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[4] In relation to Islam and interpretation of the sacred text of Quran, the transnational religious-political ideology of Salafism is an ultra-conservative reform branch or movement within Sunni tradition developed in Arabia in the first half of the 18th century.

tradition. At the end, there is a yet another community space, the third, broadest and largest circle, which is composed of those non-observant "cultural Muslims" (Jenkins 2010, 122) to whom it "happened to be Muslims" throughout history. In Southeast Europe, they represent the majority of those involved either in today's campaigns for political and cultural recognition within majoritarian cultural systems (e.g., Bulgaria, Macedonia, Greece), or engaged in processes of policy-making aimed at "sharing religions to shape Nations" (e.g., Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo).

In my opinion, nowadays it would be possible to define members of this third circle in terms of "Muslims-by-choice". They are anything but religious in any approved or institutionalised regime indeed, and their communitarian self-identification and affiliation with Islam do not follow those of their parents, which is linked to a culture that is no longer theirs in the present-day. They account for a large segment of an autochthonous Muslim population in Southeast Europe, and their "*being Muslim*" refers to a set of social practises and moral rules they traditionally follow more within the private sphere rather than in the public one. Despite the fact that they do not possess a secular looking, they do not straightforwardly practise Islam in its orthodoxy, nor they are in agreement with pro-jihadi propaganda within and above Muslim communities they belong to. Interestingly enough, they possess a very low understanding of Islam as a whole, of its sacred texts of Qur'an, and Arabic fluency is generally lacking or oftentimes very poor. Within this circle, the so-called idiosyncratic form of Islam, or "being Muslim", is more salient. In other words, their idiosyncratic identity of "*being Muslim*" is tied and more likely subordinated to a soft-identity that lacks serious and well-defined understanding of boundaries related to cultural, religious and political patterns of Islam. Because of that, it is seriously difficult and theoretically challenging to come up with a common definition.

Above all, the generational change among Balkan Muslims related to Islam and its vague definition are both quite problematic from within Southeast Europe. In the political arena, while majoritarian cultural systems project their cultural values to tackle Muslim minority issues, minority leaderships get advantages of such idiosyncratic form of Islam by keeping local Muslims under their control. In addition, majoritarian cultural systems confound religious and political aspects of Islam, whose application to everydayness is instrumentally manipulated by the most marginalised members of the community, e.g., first circle, but at the same time most organised and vocal within the vast majority of the same community, e.g., second and third circle (Nawas and Harris 2015, p.75)

4. Conclusion

The above-mentioned approach of concentric circles does not only denote a "minorities-within-a-minority" paradigm. Rather, in its interrelated scenario, it may question whether Balkan Muslims can consider an already existing form of idiosyncratic Islam within which they can take only steps to encompass religious discourse and practices without civil unrest or political actions. If so, it would be interesting then to understand – in contrast to Western approach – whether this idiosyncratic Islam can de-politicise Islam in accordance with the spirit of its time in the Balkan region, or at least paving the way to a new mixture of political and religious facets of it, and for an Islam to come. This is basically a challenge that overlaps the current attempts to deal with a sacred scripture, e.g., the Qur'an, which remains hermeneutically difficult to convey to interlocutors as it contains passages and practicing that even Muslim scholars and experts would consider extremely problematic.

In the past few years, this so-called "idiosyncratic identity" has succeeded partially within the second and completely within the third group to maintain the Balkan Peninsula untangled from a deep Islamist and jihadist intrusion, whose attempts have been truncated by local security in cooperation with international intelligence. To a certain extent, self-identification of this volatile and ongoing (trans-)formative identity of Islam has been useful to unmask the contemporary "outside confessional (re-)construction" and attempts of political manipulation that began to impinge on interethnic relations by exposing Muslim communities to a wealth of misconceptions, stereotypes and discrimination. Regardless, Balkan Muslims remain the most unvoiced and the weakest community in the form of minority group across the region, unlike those charismatic recruiters and religious leaders from the smallest and first circle that paradoxically are able to endorse reinterpretation of Islamic identity(-ies). In this instance, marginalised position in society and phenomena of ghettoisation trigger more self-segregation and antisocial behaviour on behalf of a "cultural authenticity" and "cultural protection" that bring Muslims to increase a sense of reflexive solidarity with other Muslim brothers and sisters – no matter how barbaric their commitment might be – and satisfy (unconsciously) religious leaders' aspirations accordingly. In other words, such idiosyncratic identity may expose Balkan Islam at the risk of intrusive projects (e.g., Saudis' pan-Islamic identities and causes) through reconstruction of minority groups' ontological status pertaining to the broad spectrum of self-governing rights, in which charismatic recruiters and their power-related dogmas of ideological superiority and political authority may impose over and above a given Muslim community.

In conclusion, Islam remains "under fire" in the light of a general high level of marginalisation and exclusion that facilitate the access and intrusion of local figures and "recruiters" to the community, showing a parallel phenomenon of confessional reconstruction and manipulation of religious identity. Both could not only potentially expose Balkan Muslims to endless identity crises in space and time, namely affected by a real or perceived grievance narrative of exclusion, but also it could degrade post-war scenarios in which religion has played a critical and oftentimes negative role of distinction and hatred among populations. In my opinion, in the Southeast Europe and beyond, Islam *per se* – even in all its idiosyncratic form(s) of religious and political faith -, cannot be considered as a threat for the public sphere. Although Islam's volatility and malleable features seem to remain far from Balkan Muslims' religious consciousness, it would be correct to lay out their confessional being as a religious identity socially connected with a different set of rules, norms and everyday practices that do not describe a pristine and monolithic form of faith. Thus, while integration policies might disempower potential recruiters to manipulate the Balkan Muslims through an arbitrary usage of their volatile identity, allocation of self-governing rights might come to cut stifling ambitions of religious leaders out of the Muslim minorities entirely by including them into the public sphere. An interesting topic, that, however, is another and different issue.

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