

# Islam, National Identity and Choices of Faith in the Post-Communist Balkans

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AROLDA ELBASANI, OCT 6 2015

How do believers decide what it is to be a good Muslim under conditions of religious freedom and in the context of the variety of religious offerings that characterize the competitive market of religion after Communism? How do the faithful fit into national collective categories, which tend to reduce faith to a marker of one-size-fits-all ethno-national identities? And ultimately, how do they pursue their faith in light of the freedom to choose and alternative channels of interpretation, including de-nationalized militant trends?

The collapse of Communism and its restrictive religious policies provided a crucial juncture for the mobilization of religious ideals and the revival of faith across the post-Communist realm. As a principle of vision and division of the social world, religion provided useful schemes, for re-imagining the community and making sense of the rapidly changing surrounding world. Indeed, the liberalization of religious restrictions prompted nothing less than a resurgence of religion as a sacred template of values, moral authority and political claims across the transforming post-Communist polities (Ramet, 2014).

Islam was no exception, and became a useful source of ideas, symbols and belonging in the wake of the transition from Communism. This was particularly the case in the Balkan territories, where religion became deeply enmeshed with the re-imagination of new nation-states, changing borders and related conflicts during the eventful collapse of Federal Yugoslavia. That the liberalization of religious policies went hand in hand with the intrusion of Islamic missionaries competing for the hearts and minds of post-atheist Muslim souls located at the edges of Europe, enlarged the scope of religious offers and ultimate choices (Elbasani, 2015b). The evolving alternatives pitted against each other national-collective interpretations that gained fervor in the wake of ethno-religious conflicts; extra-territorial trends that arrived with foreign Islamic organizations; and more personalized pick-and-choose discoveries of faith. The implication was a wholesale reconfiguration of alternatives and quests for faith.

### **Ethno-National Identity and Islam**

The battles for state authority, power, territory, and independent statehood during the collapse of Yugoslavia all capitalized on real and assumed ethno-religious divisions as crucial instruments for the reconstruction of the national 'self' against the opposing 'other' (Duijzings, 2000; Blumi, 1998). These ongoing conflicts contributed to essentializing and often reducing religion to a crucial and yet divisive 'depot' of collective national identities (Elbasani and Roy, 2015a). In the wide spectrum of revived Balkan nationalisms, Muslims were often depicted as the dangerous 'other', remnants of a bygone area that could hardly be integrated into the aspiring, often exclusively Orthodox nation states (Carmichael, 2002).

To be sure, neither essentialization of Islam, nor antagonism towards it, are new in this part of the world. During the post-Ottoman nation- and state-building experiences of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Muslims were similarly perceived as leftovers of the backward Ottoman occupation, almost a traitor amidst the new nation-states in the making (Katsikas, 2009). Most independent Balkan states that carved themselves out of former Ottoman territories mastered a wide

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repertoire of defamatory policies towards their 'inherited' Muslim populations – foreigners to be expelled; stigmatization *vis-à-vis* the dominant group; measures of forced homogenization; and at best toleration as a separate but difficult to digest ethno-religious group. State policies reflected the weight of Muslim communities and historical conditions, but anti-Muslim attitudes remained an important penchant of mainstream political and intellectual discourse in the post-Ottoman Balkans. Consequent Communist regimes, for their part, made use of state-sponsored academic institutions and intelligentsias to legitimize how nation and Islam merged and parted ways in the collective memory of each political entity (Norris, 1993). Such interpretations often replicated anti-Islamic attitudes, which gained new strength during the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

Post-Communist elites built on and exploited official histories depicting the Islamic other in order to forge unity, consolidate power, reshape borders and, when necessary, wage wars. Not surprisingly, 'othering' Muslims constituted the backbone of the exclusive nation- and state-building strategies that prevailed in the region (Taji-Farouki and Poulton, 1997). Later, collective memories, tailored to privilege specific ethnic groups and legitimize the national unit came in handy to reconstruct and exaggerate the looming Islamic 'threat'. Securitization of Islam, and the definition of 'otherness', easily tapped into the official oft-fabricated accounts of national histories and the dichotomous categories they assumed and nourished (Blumi, 1998).

The emergence of a global discourse on Islamic terror informed yet new categorical divisions between and within Islam – old vs new, traditional vs global, national vs foreign, victim vs threat, liberal vs radical, and, of course, peaceful vs militant. Those divisions perpetrate collective understanding of Islam and, in a way, prevent the exploration of new experiences of faith. As Bougarel has noted (2003: 346), the explorations of Islam 'have been... full of exaggerations. Some conjured up visions of a "green diagonal" penetrating the flank of a Christian Europe; others referred to "European Islam"...lost in an ocean of Orthodox fanaticism. ... Both [perspectives] represent the Balkan Muslim populations as a homogenous and stable whole'. Indeed nationalist and post-conflict paradigms, which still dominate the study of the Balkans, furnish 'a hegemonic interpretation of ... Muslim politics as trapped in the politics of identity and inter-communal ethno-religious nationalism.' (Henig and Bielenin-Lenczowska, 2013: 2; Endresen 2013)

One obvious consequence of such a dichotomous and collective reading of Islam is that any new experiences and practices of faith raise suspicions of religious obscurantism, extra-territorial allegiances, anti-democratic tendencies, anti-European predispositions and, of course, threats of global terrorism (Khalid, 2007; Merdjanova 2012). This denominational 'bias' includes all levels of analysis – from ethno-national belonging to individual practices, which all tend to point the finger at the Muslim 'other'.

## Believers' Pursuit of Faith

What this collective assignment of Muslims' roles and attributes covers more than uncovers is how believers navigate uniform terms of national belonging, what they themselves consider to be a good Muslim, and how they pursue it. The faithful certainly respond to the broad socio-political contingencies that affect their personal and communal lives. Enrolment within communal forms of belonging is particularly strong during radical moments of violence and conflict, which force believers to decide where they belong and to stick together (Duijzings, 2000). Islamic movements in Bosnia, for example, managed to place themselves at the forefront of nationalist mobilization of the Muslim population, making use of Islam for their own aims during the escalation of inter-ethnic tensions (Bougarel, 2003).

Attempts at Islamization of collective identities, however, have hardly triggered the intended homogenization effects, be it Muslims' attachment to the global community of the faithful (umma), unwavering loyalty to the ethno-national unit, uniform practices and/or alliances with the radical ideas and movements that permeated the porous institutional order after the fall of Communism (Elbasani 2015b: 342-5). Anthropological studies suggest ample evidence of different ways of 'being Muslim' across different Balkan countries and moments of transition (Bringa 1995; Ghodsee 2010). Seen from the autonomous spaces of believers' ritual and piety, Islam tends to be fluid and dynamic, while Muslim identities mixed, ambiguous and situational. Recent studies, moreover, show that the embrace of Islam after Communism is 'increasingly personal, mobile, weakly institutionalized and collective as a choice' (Elbasani and Roy,

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2015b: 2).

National and securitization paradigms miss this *in-situ* evolution of autonomous groupings of faithful – informal structures where members of an ethno-national group or sub-group endeavour to build a community of believers within a larger group of ethnic or ‘traditional’ Muslims. Believers tend to understand Islam as faith, not as a culture or tradition. They do not necessarily reject the concept of national local traditions or consider non-practicing neighbours as ‘infidels’. They strive for a religious attitude towards the world that does not consist of ‘belonging’ to a national or cultural group, but rather of freely incorporating and practicing religious norms and values in their daily lives. Moreover, they can make use of both newly-won religious rights and incoming sources of knowledge to discover and pursue their faith.

## *Freedom of Choice*

Muslim believers in the Balkans frequently avail of their right of personal choice, even when it is on critical issues of Islamic dogma and ritual, such as the wearing of the hijab. As one believer admits 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: 210) At least some of the Islamic authorities also advocate for the right of choice: ‘Everyone has the right to choose. A girl who dresses like that [in dark colors] is saying, “I want to dress like this! ... 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: 133)

The younger generation of covered women in Bosnia is indeed quite innovative in wearing the hijab and showing that veiled women ‘can be nicely and fashionably dressed’ (Mesarić, 2015: 117). When believers are deprived of the right to wear the headscarf, as in Kosovo, they consider it a restriction upon individual choice and urge their elites to look ‘to Europe and the rights enjoyed by Muslims there’ (Sadriu, 2015: 195). The reverse, however, can also be true in the discourse of Imams that advocate the ‘purification’ of Islam. As a Saudi-educated Imam in Bulgaria instructs his followers, choices propagated by ‘Western’ tools – television, education, school celebrations, graduation ceremonies, and beauty parlors – ‘ruin’ Muslim women (Olson, 2015: 136). Indeed, the range of believers’ choices evolves at the intersection of traditional practices and new channels of learning.

## *Alternative Channels of Learning*

Open communication with the world allows believers to discover Islam in unrestricted and unconventional ways using both vertical and horizontal networks of transmission. Believers have open access to the Internet and to international publications, they might go abroad to study, make pilgrimages, attend conferences, follow online sermons, fatwas, et cetera. The Internet represents a particularly easily accessible tool to learn from different sources of information and knowledge. As a believer who considers himself in the process of ‘learning’ suggests: ‘With the opening of Albania, also the religion came here... we are learning the religion at the moment, we are at the start of learning.’ (Tošić, 2015: 95).

Indeed, the faithful commonly resort to new channels of information and knowledge – informal meetings, multiple authorities and alternative sources including open debates – to learn about Islam. In the words of a pious woman from Bosnia: ‘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.’ (Mesarić, 2015: 111) It is through the new alternative sources of knowledge that the faithful discover Islam beyond traditional local precepts propagated by official authorities.

## *The Threat of Radicalization*

The multiplicity of religious interpretations, when added to the opportunities of free choice, confronts Muslims with radicalized trends and militant movements, both a persistent issue and much cited problem of the revival of Islam in

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the Balkans. Indeed, various Islamic movements have targeted Muslim populations in the region in order to propagate their message but also to create local cells that can extend their activities throughout wider Europe (Karcic, 2010; Kursani, 2015). Not all of these ideas, activities and networks that permeated the Balkans during the post-Communist transition are similarly welcomed by Muslim believers. Salafi and other radical forms of Islam have achieved very limited gains even amongst believers that search for ideas different from the local-traditional ones (Bougarel, 2003).

The dilemmas perpetrated by foreign movements and their ideas pushed local Muslims to search for interpretations most appropriate to their societies and to take ownership of their own local practices of faith. Both Muslim authorities and lay believers have seemingly resorted to 'traditional' solutions – the body of institutional arrangements, interpretations and practices inherited from the past – to juxtapose radical projects and re-cast Islam in line with the new democratic and European aspirations of their post-Communist polities (Elbasani, 2015a: 336). Tradition – a collection of beliefs and customs that is shared across generations – remains a crucial point of reference through which believers choose and make sense of alternative sources of knowledge and information (Elbasani 2015b).

## Reconfigurations of Islam

This article analyzed how lay believers recast collective terms of belonging and choose what it is to be a good Muslim in the context of conditions of religious freedom and the various offerings that characterize the open market of religion in the post-Communist Balkans. The range of alternatives evolves at the intersection of the national-collective interpretations that gained fervor in the wake of ethno-religious conflicts; extra-territorial trends that arrived with foreign Islamic missionaries; and a more personalized pick-and-choose quest for faith.

The analysis shows that in the prevailing nationalist discourse, which tends to homogenize and essentialize the existence of Islamic 'identities', any discoveries of faith raise the suspicion of a certain religious obscurantism, extra-territorial allegiances, or threats of global terrorism. Attempts at Islamization, from internal or external actors, however, have hardly triggered the intended homogenizing effects, be it attachment to a particular ethno-national unit, the global community of the faithful, uniform practices and/or radical movements. Believers are agents with the capacity to recast the communal categories into which they are commonly forced. Moreover, they strive for a religious attitude towards the world that does not consist of 'belonging' to a national or cultural group, but rather of freely incorporating and practicing religious norms in their daily lives. In their quest for faith, they make use of both newly-won religious rights and incoming sources and interpretations of faith.

Not all of the incoming foreign ideas, activities and networks that permeated the Balkans were similarly welcomed by local believers. The dilemmas perpetrated by foreign movements have seemingly pushed local Muslims to search for interpretations most appropriate to their societies and to take ownership of their own local practices of faith. Still, more research is needed on why and how believers screen the ideas at offer and choose local ways of 'being' Muslim.

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**Arolda Elbasani**'s research interests lay at the intersection of European Integration, Islamic politics, and comparative democratisation. Her articles have appeared among others at Politics and Religion, Democratization, Europe-Asia Studies, Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, Balkans and Near Eastern Studies, and Sudosteuroopa. She has also co-edited *The Revival of Islam in the Balkans*; and edited *European Integration and Transformation in the Western Balkans*.