

"MUSLIM BY NATIONALITY" and the upcoming Neo-Ottomanism

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We know from the last few years that already passed, that Europe was repeatedly shaken by a wave of terrorist acts that were conducted by several fundamentalist Islamic groups. Most of the media coverage from this period centered its discourse about the connection between Islamic radicalism and migration to Europe from various Muslim-majority states.

There were very few remarkable discussions that put the indigenous Muslims of Europe into the spotlight in the present context. Yes, indigenous Muslims of Europe, this term might give certain people a headache as the general conception is that all of the continent's adherence to Islam have Arabic or Turkish ancestry, thus their ancestors came "from somewhere else" at a given time in history. The Balkans host a number of people groups that practice Islam and are neither of Turkish or Arabic descent. We are talking more exactly about the Slavic Muslims, a general term that is applied to describe groups, as it is the case with the Bosniaks of Bosnia and Sandzak, the Gorani of southern Kosovo, the Tordesh of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and the Pomaks of Rhodopian Bulgaria and Northern Greece.

We can also add to the equation a small number of Muslim Greeks and Albanians. If we put aside many of the self-designated identities that are found throughout this region, we could easily come to the conclusion that the Slavic Muslims groups' cultural identities do not diverge greatly from one another. Later, this represent one of the reasons that lead to the creation of the Muslim nationality within Tito's Yugoslavia, thus people could identify as "ethnic Muslim". There were also a few other factors that we have to take in to consideration, by creating a free-standing Muslim nationality within Yugoslavia the long-standing conflict between the Serbs and Croats, that argued whether the Muslims should identify with one or the other side, was gradually neutralized. Even so, the religious landscape of the Balkans is gradually changing, in the aftermath of the breakup of Yugoslavia, there is a strong desire to reaffirming the identities of small ethnic factions. Some studies showed that, even though religion played a major role in crystalizing the Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian identities, there is a slow drop in religiosity that can be seen among Croats. This can be a sign that the nation is trying to put more stress on Croatia's links to

various regional powers, to the West, and to highlight more its role in the regional history that it shares with former imperial powers such as Venice, Italy or Austria-Hungary.

The general trend in the region nowadays is that of a “radicalization of identities”, meaning that certain groups are more and more in favor of cutting, or denying, any historical ties that they have with their Slavic neighbors, accentuating the purely distinctive elements of its own culture. In the case of the Muslims, the material and spiritual heritage was passed on to them from the Ottoman Empire. Besides the well-known charm of Osmali towns such as Novi Pazar, we must understand that the rise of Neo-Ottomanism is becoming more and more visible throughout the Balkans, especially since Erdogan became the head of the Republic of Turkey, even though this ideology was existent way before his rise to power. Neo-Ottomanism stresses the role that the Republic of Turkey needs to play in those areas that were former part of the Empire, thus the Republic becoming a protector of those cultural values that are regarded as being Ottoman.

This approach is quite conflicting when it is put side-by-side with Kemalism, the later one is not so much in favor of the crystallisation in the Balkans, and not only, of a post-Ottoman realm, and stresses the need of a bigger involvement in internal affairs. Now, more than before, Neo-Ottomanism has a clear slope that helps with making its message well-known throughout the Balkans. There are a few factors that need to be addressed, that heavily contributed to the emergence of imperialism in the region:

The creation of the “Muslim Nation” in Tito’s Yugoslavia, which acted as a unifying framework for the Muslim groups that were scattered through the country;

Past tensions that were left unsolved between Muslims and non-Muslims;

A history of genocide which made many Muslims not trust central authority;

Forced policies of assimilation and systemic discrimination, especially in Bulgaria;

A diaspora of Slavic Muslims, especially Bosniaks, that live in Turkey, making the Turkish state a trust-worthy place for many Slavs of Islamic faith;

Investments made by Turkey within Muslim-majority areas of the Balkans, like Sandzak and Bosnia, contrasted with the lack of investment that came from the central authorities;

The common traits shared with Turkey through the Ottoman heritage inherited by the Muslims of the Balkans;

Radicalization of faith, a transition toward a more faith-based identity in the detriment of an ethnic-based one.

The upcoming years are vital for the stability of the Balkans. The degree in which stability, or the lack thereof, will be present will highly depend on how well aligned are the political elites and intellectuals with the radical ideologies that are surfacing. A very firm act of disownment of radicalism that would come from the elites would raise some red flags among the mainstream society in regard to the danger that such ideologies pose. Even so, we must take into account, that in the case of states of the Balkans, information has more difficulties in reaching people in short time. This is mainly due to the rugged terrain, lack of efficient technology and poor infrastructure. The radicalization of Islam can be only perpetuated through exploiting the weakest points of the local societies, mostly having to do with poverty and the lack of opportunities for communal development. Using personal, material, gains as a means of twisting the minds of otherwise peaceful people and drawing them into fundamentalism is a technique that proved to be often efficient in the case of communities that are struggling with poverty. As time will progress, we will see the confrontation between the two Islamic traditions, now present in region, to be more visible, the future stability of the region will also be determined by which will gain the most ground.