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THE PHENOMENON OF “BALKAN ISLAM” AS A FACTOR OF INTERCULTURAL AND ETHNO-SOCIAL DIALOGUE

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ABSTRACT

The Phenomenon of “Balkan Islam” as a Factor of Intercultural and Ethno-Social Dialogue

This article reconceptualizes “Balkan Islam” as a dynamic and translocal phenomenon shaped by migration, imperial legacies, and contemporary transnational processes. It moves beyond essentialist approaches by analyzing “Balkan Islam” as a context-dependent configuration of practices, institutions, and identities. Using an interpretive and metamodern framework, the study highlights the oscillation between local and global, tradition and modernity. The findings show that “Balkan Islam” functions as a mediating space of intercultural dialogue, where diverse forms of belonging are continuously negotiated in historically plural societies.

KEYWORDS: Balkan Islam, migration, transnationalism, “Ottoman heritage”, ethno-social identity, metamodernity

IZVLEČEK

Fenomen »balkanskega islama« kot dejavnik medkulturnega in etnično-socialnega dialoga

Avtorji v prispevku na novo konceptualizirajo »balkanski islam« kot dinamičen in translokalni pojav, na katerega vplivajo migracije, imperialna dediščina in sodobni transnacionalni procesi. Analizirajo ga onkraj esencialističnega vidika, kot kontekstualno pogojeno konfiguracijo praks, institucij in identitet. V svoji študiji z uporabo interpretativnega in metamodernega okvira izpostavljajo prepletanje lokalnega in globalnega, tradicije in modernosti. Njihove ugotovitve kažejo, da »balkanski islam« deluje kot prostor medkulturnega dialoga, kjer se v zgodovinsko pluralnih družbah nenehno vzpostavljajo raznolike oblike pripadnosti.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: balkanski islam, migracije, transnacionalizem, »osmanska dediščina«, etnično-socialna identiteta, metamodernost

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the study of Islam in the Balkans has increasingly attracted scholarly attention within the broader fields of migration studies, sociology of religion, and post-imperial transformations. This growing interest reflects not only the historical significance of Islam as a constitutive element of the region but also its evolving role in the context of globalization, transnational mobility, and shifting political landscapes. As numerous scholars have demonstrated, Muslim communities in the Balkans cannot be understood as a uniform or monolithic entity; they represent internally differentiated formations shaped by diverse historical trajectories, institutional frameworks, and patterns of belonging (Öktem, 2011; Merdjanova, 2013).

At the same time, the concept of “Balkan Islam” has emerged in both academic and political discourse as a shorthand for describing these complex configurations. However, its analytical status remains ambiguous. On the one hand, it denotes a specific regional form of Islam, often associated with Ottoman legacies, relative institutional moderation, and embeddedness in European sociopolitical contexts. On the other hand, critics point to the risk of essentializing a highly heterogeneous field of religious practices and identities. This tension reveals a broader epistemological problem: how to conceptualize Islam in the Balkans without reducing it to either a fixed cultural type or a purely fragmented set of local variations.

This article addresses this problem by proposing to interpret “Balkan Islam” not as a bounded entity but as a dynamic and relational sociocultural formation, constituted through historical processes of migration, imperial governance, and contemporary transnational interactions. In this perspective, Islam in the Balkans is approached as a field in which multiple layers of identity—religious, ethnic, linguistic, and political—intersect and are continuously renegotiated. The region itself, frequently described in the literature as a linguistic, ethnic, and religious mosaic shaped by long-term imperial and post-imperial legacies, provides a particularly revealing context for examining such processes (Hajdarpasić, 2008; Mishkova, 2025).

The main problem addressed in this study, therefore, concerns the conditions under which Islam in the Balkans functions as a medium of intercultural and ethno-social dialogue, rather than merely as a marker of difference or division. This analysis examines how historical patterns of Muslim migration, institutional development, and external influence have shaped a translocal space in which diverse forms of belonging coexist and interact.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts an interpretive, transnational, and metamodern-informed approach to examine the phenomenon of “Balkan Islam” within the broader framework of migration studies. It conceptualizes Islam in the Balkans not as a fixed

religious system but as a dynamic and relational sociocultural formation, shaped by historical migrations, post-imperial legacies, and contemporary global flows.

The analysis is situated at the intersection of transnationalism, migration studies, sociology of religion, and metamodern theory. Drawing on the concept of multiple homelands, the study interprets “Balkan Islam” as a mediating structure between local embeddedness and transnational belonging, while also emphasizing its internal ambivalence and processual nature.

A metamodern perspective is introduced here as a sensitivity to oscillation between seemingly opposed paradigms: tradition and modernity, locality and globality, secularization and re-sacralization. Rather than resolving these tensions, the study treats them as constitutive of Balkan Islamic experience. In this sense, “Balkan Islam” is understood as a space of ongoing negotiation, where identities are continuously re-articulated across shifting historical and cultural horizons.

For analytical clarity, the concept is operationalized along three interrelated dimensions: post-imperial continuity—Islam as a legacy of Ottoman institutional and cultural formations shaping long-term patterns of mobility and identity; ethno-religious articulation—the intertwining of religious affiliation with ethnic and national identities in post-Ottoman and post-socialist contexts; transnational reconfiguration—the role of contemporary migration, diasporic networks, and external actors, especially Turkey, in reshaping symbolic and institutional landscapes.

The following questions guided the study:

1. How have historical and contemporary migration processes contributed to the formation of “Balkan Islam” as a translocal phenomenon?
2. In what ways does Islam function as a resource for negotiating multiple and shifting forms of belonging in Balkan societies?
3. How do transnational flows and external influences reshape the internal structure of Balkan Islamic identities and their role in intercultural dialogue?

The research follows a qualitative comparative case study design, focusing on Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Slovenia, and Croatia. These cases were selected to reflect variation in migration histories, religious configurations, and degrees of transnational embeddedness.

The comparative perspective enables the identification of both structural continuities and context-specific variations. At the same time, the metamodern lens allows us to interpret these differences not as contradictions but as coexisting and interacting modalities of social reality.

Hermeneutic (interpretive) analysis is employed to examine how Islam in the Balkans is represented and understood within academic, political, and institutional discourses, with particular attention to meanings of identity, heritage, and belonging. Qualitative content analysis is used to identify recurring narratives related to

“Ottoman heritage,” “European Islam,” and external influence, focusing on how these narratives construct symbolic boundaries and mediate intercultural interaction. Socio-historical analysis reconstructs key phases of migration and institutional development, from Ottoman expansion to post–Cold War transformations. Comparative analysis facilitates cross-case evaluation of how different sociopolitical contexts shape the relationship between Islam, migration, and identity formation.

The study relies on secondary qualitative data, including peer-reviewed literature in migration studies, Islamic studies, and Balkan studies; analytical reports and policy documents; official materials of Islamic organizations; and relevant media and public discourse sources. A critical approach to sources is maintained, distinguishing between academic knowledge, policy narratives, and ideologically embedded representations.

The analysis proceeds in three stages: historical mapping—tracing migration processes and their institutional and cultural consequences; discursive differentiation—identifying how Islam is framed within narratives of identity, belonging, and heritage; metamodern synthesis—interpreting “Balkan Islam” as a fluid and evolving formation that oscillates between tradition and transformation, functioning as a mediating space of intercultural and ethno-social dialogue. This strategy moves beyond static or binary interpretations and situates the study within contemporary debates on mobility, hybridity, and the plurality of belonging in migration contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Genesis of Islam in the Balkans

The emergence and development of Islam in the Balkans and Southeastern Europe are closely linked to the history of the Ottoman Empire, which lasted from 1299 to 1922 and at its height extended from the approaches of Vienna to Yemen and East Africa, and from Algeria to the Caspian region (İnalçık, 1973; Imber, 2002; Barkey, 2008).

In 1352, the Ottomans, based in Asia Minor, crossed the Dardanelles and established a foothold in Thrace, marking the beginning of their expansion into the Balkans (İnalçık, 1973; Imber, 2002). The consolidation of Ottoman rule in the region was not solely a military process but was also supported by religious and social actors, particularly Sufi brotherhoods. These groups played a significant role in facilitating the integration of newly conquered territories by providing a religious framework that combined spiritual authority with social organization (Ocak, 2005; Kafadar, 1995).

The Bektashi Sufi order (Bektashiya), founded in the thirteenth century, played a significant role in the Islamization of the Balkans. The order’s doctrine integrates elements of Shiism, pantheism, and pre-existing Christian practices, which facilitated its influence among local populations, including former Christians who converted to Islam in Turkey, Bosnia, and Albania (Mélíckoff, 1992; Norris, 2006). Beyond its doctrinal

teachings, the Bektashi order acted as a social and cultural mediator, establishing lodges that functioned as centers of communal life, education, and ritual practice. Anthropological research shows that such Sufi institutions were not only religious centers but also sites of interfaith interaction: for instance, shared pilgrimage places and local ritual exchanges in Kosovo demonstrate the coexistence and negotiation of religious identities at the everyday level (Duijzings, 2000). These practices contributed to a form of religious pluralism in which Bektashi Sufism facilitated both the integration of converts and the maintenance of cross-religious social ties. Beginning in the fifteenth century, a rapprochement developed between the Bektashi order and the Janissary corps, which secured the order a privileged status within the Ottoman administrative and military framework for several centuries (Norris, 2006; Mélikoff, 1992). This association reinforced the social influence of the Bektashi tariqa, allowing it to consolidate networks of spiritual and communal authority across the Balkans. By the first quarter of the twentieth century, it is estimated that up to 20% of the Albanian population identified with the Bektashi order, highlighting its deep-rooted presence in the region (Mustafa, 2008). Anthropological research further illuminates the local and everyday dimensions of Bektashi practice. Kravanja (2008) examines the ambiguous perceptions of Christianity, Islam, and Bektashism in Macedonia and the wider Balkans, emphasizing how local communities navigated overlapping religious identities and social loyalties. Similarly, Mustafa (2008) explores how the Bektashi order in contemporary Albania localized Ottoman heritage, blending historical practices with modern social and religious realities, thus shaping a distinctive Balkan Islamic identity. These studies underscore that the Bektashi tariqa functioned not only as a religious institution but also as a mediator of cultural continuity, interfaith coexistence, and social integration.

The Islamization of the Balkans has sometimes been identified as one contributing factor significantly facilitated by the influence of various religious and social "heretical" movements, primarily Bogomilism. The fundamental tenet of the Bogomil doctrine held that God could not have created the material world and that entry into the Kingdom of Heaven required extreme asceticism (Brown, 1996; Hajdarpasić, 2008). This movement was one of the largest "heretical" currents in the Balkans and Asia Minor during the tenth to fourteenth centuries. In its early phase, it drew upon Manichaeism, Paulician, and Messalian influences. The intense doctrinal and social confrontation between the Bogomils and established religious authorities, particularly Serbian Orthodoxy and Croatian Catholicism, created conditions that facilitated the voluntary conversion of a substantial portion of the population in the western Balkans to Islam (Brown, 1996). It is important to emphasize that Ottoman successes in the region were not solely due to military power; rather, they were reinforced by the Ottomans' ability to leverage pre-existing social, religious, and cultural fault lines and to integrate local populations into new administrative and religious frameworks (Hajdarpasić, 2008). This interplay of doctrinal pluralism and imperial strategy exemplifies the complex dynamics underlying the spread of Islam in the Balkans.

The empire's prestige at that time was very high in both the East and the West; the arrival of the Ottomans was expected as deliverance from injustice and the triumph of peasant and labor "truth." Ideas about the people's love and tolerance of the Turks led to the idealization of the order in the empire, not only among the broad masses of Europe, but also in the projects for the reconstruction of society of such outstanding thinkers of the late Renaissance as Tommaso Campanella (1568–1639) and Ludovico Zuccolo (1568–1630).

During the late medieval and early modern periods, certain segments of Christian and Jewish populations in Europe expressed favorable attitudes toward the Ottoman Empire, often admiring its administrative efficiency, military prowess, or perceived justice in governance (Finkel, 2005; Faroqi, 2004). This phenomenon, sometimes characterized as "Turkophile sentiment," was not uniform or widespread but rather context-specific, reflecting local political, economic, and religious circumstances. For instance, in parts of Germany, the successes of the Ottoman army were noted in connection with hopes for relief from local feudal conflicts, as contemporaries such as Ulrich von Hutten recorded, who linked Ottoman campaigns with the broader aspirations of the Reformation (von Hutten, 1862). Similarly, selected literary works and political pamphlets including Hans Rosenplüt's *Das Lied von den Türken / Von den Türken* (ca. 1458/1459) and later Orthodox polemical works such as Zakhariia Kopystensky's *Palinodiia* (1621), attest to localized admiration or fascination with Ottoman institutions. However, these sources reflect particular intellectual or social milieus rather than a generalized European consensus. Overall, these examples suggest that positive perceptions of the Ottoman Empire were mediated by pragmatic considerations such as trade opportunities, political alliances, and the desire for social reform rather than reflecting uncritical or homogeneous admiration across Europe.

The process of Islamization in Bosnia and Herzegovina was particularly pronounced, but it was neither uniform nor solely the result of direct intervention by the Ottoman central administration. Historiography emphasizes that Islamization in the region was a gradual and multifaceted process, shaped by social, fiscal, and political dynamics within the Ottoman imperial framework (Lopašić, 1994). Members of the pre-existing elite often converted to Islam in order to retain property, social status, and access to administrative or military positions. Unlike in many other Balkan regions, this process also extended to sections of the peasant population, reflecting broader patterns of social mobility, economic incentives, and integration within Ottoman governance. From the late seventeenth century to the final decades of the nineteenth century, waves of Muslim refugees from territories recaptured by non-Ottoman powers further increased the Muslim population in Bosnia. Over time, these processes contributed to the formation of a substantial Muslim population of South Slavic origin in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Lopašić, 1994).

The emergence of independent Balkan states in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries dealt a serious blow to the Ottoman Empire but did not end Turkish

political interest in the region. After World War II, socialist governments across much of the region limited the scope of Turkish engagement, although regional political alignments differed considerably. Following the end of the Cold War and the reconfiguration of regional politics, Turkey expanded its activity in the Balkans. This engagement intensified after the Justice and Development Party came to power under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in late 2002. In recent years, the problems of the Balkan direction in Ankara's foreign policy have repeatedly attracted the attention of foreign authors (Aydıntaşbaş, 2019; Dede, 2014). Some researchers have examined the historical aspects of the Turkish presence in the Balkans and their projection on the current situation in the region (Şener, 2019; Bebler, 2017). Many foreign scholarly publications have been devoted to the Turkish and Muslim communities in the Balkans (Sancaktar, 2019; Öktem, 2011).

The emergence of Islam in the Balkans from the beginning of Ottoman expansion into the region in the fourteenth century through the later Ottoman period was a complex, multilayered process shaped by Ottoman political structures, social and fiscal incentives, and the mediation of Sufi orders such as the Bektashiya (Mélíkov, 1992; Norris, 2006). Pre-existing heterodox movements, like Bogomilism, facilitated the gradual integration of local populations into Islamic frameworks, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where social mobility and local conditions influenced conversion patterns (Brown, 1996; Lopašić, 1994). This Ottoman-era spread and institutionalization of Islam created a distinctive Muslim South Slavic identity and highlights the enduring interplay between imperial governance, religious pluralism, and local social realities in the Balkans (Hajdarpašić, 2008; Duijzings, 2000).

The Balkans as an "Ottoman heritage" and as part of the Islamic world

In the socio-philosophical and political discourse, Turkey's strategy toward Balkan Muslim communities is underpinned by several interrelated ideas. First, the Balkans are often framed as part of Turkey's "Ottoman heritage," reflecting the historical legacy of centuries of Ottoman governance, which continues to inform cultural diplomacy and bilateral relations (Hajdarpašić, 2008; Brown, 1996). Second, the Balkans are conceptualized as part of the broader Islamic world, emphasizing shared religious, cultural, and linguistic ties that foster a sense of transnational belonging and solidarity (Öktem, 2011; Merdjanova, 2013). Finally, Turkey draws on the notion of a shared cultural heritage between the Balkans and Anatolia, highlighting historical continuities in architecture, rituals, cuisine, and social organization as foundations for contemporary political and social engagement (Şener, 2019; Sancaktar, 2019). Together, these discursive frameworks provide both ideological justification and practical rationale for Ankara's policies aimed at maintaining influence and nurturing socio-religious networks across the Balkans.

Ahmet Davutoğlu—an academic, former diplomat, and Turkey's 26th prime minister—argues that this "Ottoman heritage" gives modern Turkey unique

opportunities in the Balkans (Davutoğlu, 2010, pp. 122–123). He also maintains that the Turkish leadership should secure international legal protection for ethno-confessional minorities (Davutoğlu, 2010, p. 123). Davutoğlu's ideas have been influential in scholarly and policy discussions of Turkey's renewed engagement with the Balkans. Turkish researchers have similarly argued that modern Turkey occupies a "special and unique position" in the Balkans as an increasingly active representative of "Balkan Turks and Muslims in the international arena" (Şener, 2019, p. 387). Balkan authors of Turkish origin believe that "Turkey, as the heir to the Ottoman Empire, has a moral responsibility to provide assistance to the Balkan countries" (Aljaf, 2016, p. 229). Slovenian researcher A. Zalta writes that part of the population of the Balkan countries perceives Islam in the Balkans as a consequence of the Ottoman conquest, an "anachronism," "a foreign body on European soil that should have disappeared with the departure of the Ottomans" (Zalta, 2016, p. 86). Critics of Turkish policy began to call it "neo-Ottomanism," attributing to this term an expansionist agenda, including religious expansion (Ekinci, 2013, p. 24).

The relationship between Balkan Muslim communities and modern Turkey is complex and variegated, reflecting historical legacies, local religious traditions, and contemporary political dynamics. While some studies suggest that Muslim minorities, including Turkish diasporas, view Turkey as a protector of their ethno-confessional interests, reinforcing Ankara's self-perception as a patron (Öktem, 2011, p. 162), this generalization risks oversimplifying local realities. In Albania, for instance, secular authorities exhibit a cautious stance toward the Ottoman heritage, despite the predominantly Muslim population, indicating that religious affiliation does not automatically translate into political or cultural alignment with Turkey. Furthermore, the historical role of Bektashism complicates the picture: as an Anatolian-origin order integrated into Albanian and Western Macedonian social life, it reflects syncretic religious practices and localized forms of identity that mediate but do not necessarily reproduce connections to modern Turkey (Duijzings, 2000; Mustafa, 2008). In Kosovo, Duijzings (2000) emphasizes the nuanced coexistence of multiple religious and ethnic groups, illustrating that perceptions of Turkey and the Ottoman past are contingent, context-specific, and mediated through local histories of interfaith interaction rather than straightforward ethno-religious loyalty. This suggests that contemporary Turkish influence in the Balkans must be understood as filtered through complex layers of historical memory, local religious practice, and regional politics.

The perception of the Balkans as part of the broader Muslim world continues to inform contemporary Turkish intellectual and political discourse. As noted by President Erdoğan's press secretary İbrahim Kalın, "Since the Balkans joined the larger Muslim world, the Turks began to consider this region their home" (Kalın, 2018). Kalın's sentiment reflects not merely historical memory but an ongoing cultural and ideological framing in which the Balkans are understood as a space of shared religious and civilizational heritage. The fourth volume (modern context) of the

five-volume work *Islam in the Balkans* (Kafkasyalı, 2016),¹ published by the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) in 2016, exemplifies this discourse by presenting a range of scholarly contributions from both Turkish and Balkan authors that address the history, culture, and contemporary situation of Muslim communities in the region. A brief discourse analysis of the later volumes indicates that they do not merely document historical facts: titles such as "From the conquest of hearts to the representation of mentality," "From times of glory to times of humility," and "Demolishing mentality which demolishes bridges" suggest a normative and evaluative stance, framing the Ottoman and post-Ottoman legacies in moral and civilizational terms and implicitly guiding readers toward a particular understanding of Balkan Islam as culturally and spiritually linked to Turkey. This framing resonates with broader trends in Turkish soft power strategies in the region, emphasizing cultural continuity and religious affinity while simultaneously projecting contemporary political narratives.

Turkish historian K. Karpāt, in his contribution to the abovementioned five-volume work *Islam in the Balkans*, proposes a broad periodization for understanding the development of Islam in the region, distinguishing three key phases: the early presence of Turkic groups in the Balkans, the institutionalization and spread of Islam during the Ottoman period, and the contemporary phase marked by renewed Muslim migrations since the late twentieth century (Karpāt, 2016, p. 101). Karpāt further suggests that certain forms of cultural continuity may have persisted among populations historically connected to Turkic groups, thereby facilitating later cultural and religious interactions. However, such interpretations should be approached with caution. The linkage between ethnicity and religion in the Balkan context remains highly complex and contested, and the notion of a uniform trajectory of Islamization across "the Balkan peoples" risks oversimplification. A substantial body of scholarship emphasizes instead the fragmented, locally embedded, and plural character of Islam in the Balkans, shaped by diverse historical experiences, regional dynamics, and the coexistence of multiple Islamic traditions and institutions (Öktem, 2011; Merdjanova, 2013). From this perspective, Karpāt's framework can be read as one interpretive model among others, rather than a comprehensive explanation of the region's religious transformations.

The Turkish political establishment recognizes the exceptional contribution of people from the Balkans to the formation of Ottoman and Turkish culture. According to İ. Kalın, "it is impossible to understand the art, cultural, religious and political life of the Ottomans without taking into account the colossal contribution of writers, scientists and politicians of Balkan origin" (Kalın, 2018). In the Ottoman period, many

1 The five volumes of *Balkanlarda İslâm* (Kafkasyalı, 2016) are titled: 1) *Muğlaklıktan berraklığa* [From ambiguity to clarity]; 2) *Türkistan'dan Balkanlara* [From Turkestan to the Balkans]; 3) *Gönül fethinden zihniyet temsiline* [From the conquest of hearts to the representation of mentality]; 4) *Vakti azizden vakti zelalet* [From times of glory to times of humility]; 5) *Köprüler yıkan zihniyetin yıkılışı* [Demolishing the mentality that demolishes bridges].

great viziers and military leaders came from the Balkans, as did scholars and cultural figures, including the celebrated Ottoman architect Mimar Sinan, whose name is given to the university in modern Istanbul. In the Republican period, such figures include the first president, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Mango, 2002, p. 27), the author of the Turkish anthem, Mehmet Akif Ersoy, and poet and writer Yahya Kemal Beyatlı.

The concept of the “Balkan region” is broader and more flexible, referring to a historical-cultural and sociopolitical space characterized by ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, as well as by shared historical experiences, including Ottoman governance, socialist modernization, and post–Cold War transformations (Mishkova, 2025; Hajdarpašić, 2008). In contemporary scholarship, the Balkan region is often understood as a relational and processual construct, whose boundaries shift depending on the analytical framework: geographical, political, or cultural (Bjelić & Savić, 2002). This approach emphasizes that the Balkans are not a fixed entity but a dynamic intersection of identities, discourses, and power relations.

The Turkish state supports various projects in the Balkan countries to preserve and promote this heritage: Ottoman buildings are being restored, catalogs of Ottoman manuscripts stored in libraries and archives are being compiled, and courses are being opened where one can learn Islamic arts (Ekinci, 2013, p. 23). Preservation and restoration of cultural heritage in the Balkans is a “constant priority” of the Turkish Foreign Ministry (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 2020). Turkey is actively involved in restoring Ottoman-era heritage and in constructing schools and educational centers in areas with significant Muslim populations. The Turkish language and culture are popularized in the Balkans through a network of institutes named after Yunus Emre, established in various cities. A prominent example of Ankara’s cultural engagement is its policy toward Bosnia and Herzegovina. By 2019, just a decade after the opening of the first Yunus Emre Institute in the Balkans, more than 5,000 people had participated in Turkish-language courses at its Sarajevo branch. A project was launched in seven cantons across the country to teach Turkish as an elective foreign language in secondary schools, with 8,000 Bosnian students participating (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 2019). In this sense, the promotion of Turkish language and culture, including through institutions such as the Yunus Emre Institutes, reflects a combination of cultural diplomacy and strategic engagement, rather than a purely heritage-driven agenda.

Muslims in the Balkans are diverse not only ethnically and linguistically but also in their religious affiliations and practices. Most belong to the Sunni Hanafi madhhab, which was the dominant legal school in the Ottoman imperial context. Other Islamic traditions have also long been present in the region, including Alevism in Bulgaria and the Bektashi Sufi order in Albania and North Macedonia. In recent decades, religious expansion by some Arab states has contributed to the emergence of Salafi currents in parts of the Balkans. Salafi movements generally seek to purify Islam of practices they regard as later accretions, including practices associated with local, ethnic, or cultural traditions. They also reject forms of intercession and criticize

many Sufi practices as incompatible with their understanding of Islam (Gauvain, 2012, p. 305).

It should be noted, however, that this overview does not fully capture the internal diversity of Islamic traditions in the Balkans. In addition to Bektashism, several other Sufi orders, such as the Rifa'i and Naqshbandi, have played a significant role, particularly in regions like North Macedonia, contributing to a rich and locally embedded religious landscape. Moreover, anthropological studies emphasize that these affiliations are often fluid and intersect with local practices and identities; for example, Duijzings (2000) demonstrates the existence of complex, syncretic forms of religious life in Kosovo that transcend clear doctrinal boundaries. Therefore, rather than a linear differentiation between "traditional" and "reformist" currents, the religious field in the Balkans is better understood as a plural and dynamic constellation of overlapping practices, institutions, and interpretations.

Islamic organizations in the Balkans

Albania

Albania has historically been regarded as one of Europe's few Muslim-majority countries. According to the 2023 Albanian census, there were 1,101,718 Muslims in the country (45.7% of the country's population) and 115,644, Bektashi (4.8%) (Religious belief and minorities, 2024). It is worth noting that several decades of communism have led to the fact that the majority of citizens of modern Albania lead a secular lifestyle, although they can formally be considered Muslims. The Muslim Community of Albania (MCA) is the largest Sunni organization in Albania and is recognized by the state as a national organization (Komuniteti Mysliman i Shqipërisë, n.d.). The MCA runs most of the mosques. It was founded in 1923 and reorganized in 1991.

Recognized by the state as a national organization and as a separate religious community, the World Bektashi Headquarters is the largest Sufi organization in Albania and presents itself as the order's international headquarters, although this status is disputed by some other Bektashi representatives (Kryegjyshata Botërore Bektashiane, n.d.). The Muslim Forum of Albania was founded in 2005 but does not have official state recognition. Its main objectives are to combat racism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia (Muslim Forum of Albania, n.d.).

At the same time, the contemporary institutional presence of Bektashism in Albania cannot be fully understood without its historical role in the nineteenth-century Albanian national awakening. Scholars have emphasized that the Bektashi order contributed significantly to the Albanian National Awakening by encouraging the use of the Albanian language, supporting educational and literary activities, and promoting a relatively inclusive interpretation of Islam (Skendi, 1967; Clayer, 2007; Elsie, 2010). In this sense, Bektashism has functioned not only as a religious community but also as a historical mediator between religious affiliation and national

consciousness, which adds an important layer to its current institutional and social significance.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

As of 2013, Muslims accounted for 50.7% of the population in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is generally accepted that Islam arrived in Bosnia with the Ottoman troops in the fifteenth century. Most of the Muslim population of Bosnia and Herzegovina is descended from local populations that converted to Islam during the Ottoman period from the mid-fifteenth century to 1878.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a secular state with no official religion (Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1995). Relations between the state and religious communities are regulated by the Law on Freedom of Religion and the Legal Status of Churches and Religious Communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2004). This legal framework guarantees religious freedom, recognizes the legal status of religious organizations, and defines the principles of their interaction with state institutions. Basic agreements have been concluded with major religious communities, including the Catholic Church (Holy See & Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2006), while relations with the Islamic Community have developed within a broader and evolving institutional framework. The principal representative body of Muslims in the country is the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (ICBH), which functions as an autonomous religious institution responsible for organizing religious life, education, and community activities (Islamska zajednica u Bosni i Hercegovini, n.d.). At the same time, the contemporary structure of Islamic institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina should be understood in light of the region's complex historical development. The formation of the Muslim population cannot be reduced to a single process of conversion but reflects a multilayered historical trajectory shaped by Ottoman governance, social mobility, regional diversity, and long-term processes of cultural and religious transformation, as emphasized in the historiography.

The ICBH, according to its Constitution, is "the sole and unique community of Muslims living in Bosnia and Herzegovina, of Bosniaks living outside their homeland and other Muslims who accept this community as their own" (The Islamic Community – Sentinel and Principles, 2012). The state recognizes the ICBH as the institution that traditionally represents Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is independent in regulating its activities (rituals, Islamic education, distribution of Islamic donations, publishing, charity, and so on), can manage its property, and is financed mainly through membership fees, *zakat*, and other sources. The ICBH is divided into 9 muftiates in Bosnia, including the Military Muftiate as a super-territorial entity, and 5 units in Slovenia, Croatia, Sandžak in Serbia, Germany, and Australia, along with other umbrella organizations uniting Muslims from Bosnia and Herzegovina in the United States, Austria, and other European countries based on their ethno-religious identity. Educational institutions managed by ICBH include six Islamic universities and

madrasas, a secular school (Bošnjačka gimnazija), and three faculties. At the same time, this organizational description requires clarification. The internal and transnational structure of the ICBH is not uniform and should not be understood as a system of clearly defined “units” in all contexts; its presence outside Bosnia and Herzegovina often takes the form of affiliated, partner, or historically linked organizations, whose degree of institutional integration varies across countries. Furthermore, the educational framework of the ICBH reflects different levels of instruction: madrasas function as secondary religious schools, while higher education is provided through faculties and other tertiary institutions. This distinction is important for accurately understanding the institutional and educational landscape of Islamic communities in the region.

In addition to the ICBH, a number of smaller organizations operate in areas such as religious outreach, culture, scholarship, student affairs, and women’s education. The most significant charitable organization is the Muslim Charitable Society “Merhamet” (Muslimansko dobrotvorno društvo “Merhamet”), founded in 1913. Organizations such as the Nahla Center for Education and Research also contribute to women’s education and community life (Centar za edukaciju i istraživanje Nahla, n.d.).

However, these examples should be understood as illustrative rather than exhaustive, as the landscape of civil and religious initiatives is considerably broader and includes a wide range of local and transnational organizations that contribute to the social, educational, and cultural life of Muslim communities in the country.

Slovenia

In Slovenia, the Islamic Community of the Republic of Slovenia (Slovenian IC) is the main religious organization representing Islam (Islamska skupnost v Republiki Sloveniji, n.d.). It was established in 2007. It employs imams and organizes the religious life of almost all Slovenian Muslims. The Slovenian IC is a branch of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina and adheres to the Sunni direction. Both organizations operate within the framework of the Hanafi legal school (madhhab). Although the community is multiethnic, the overwhelming majority of its members are Bosniaks. Alongside the Islamic Community in Slovenia (IC), other organizations contribute to the country’s Islamic religious landscape. One of these is the Muslim Community of Slovenia (MCS), established and officially registered in 2006 by Osman Đogić, the first Mufti of the Islamic Community in Slovenia (2001–2005), who played a prominent role in advocating for the construction of Slovenia’s first mosque. The establishment of the MCS followed an institutional split within the Slovenian Islamic community, reflecting differences concerning leadership and organizational governance rather than theological doctrine (Slovenska muslimanska skupnost, n.d.; Banjac & Zalta, 2025, 187). Cultural and educational activities connected to Islam and Muslim communities in Slovenia are also carried out by organizations such as the Averroes Cultural and Educational Institute, whose work focuses on intercultural

dialogue and educational programming in areas such as Balkan studies, Oriental studies, Islam, and ethnology (Kulturno-izobraževalni zavod Averroes, n.d.). The coexistence of these organizations demonstrates that the Islamic institutional field in Slovenia is pluralistic and dynamic, evolving through internal organizational developments, differing models of religious representation, and changing patterns of community leadership.

Croatia

The 2021 census in Croatia recorded 50,981 Muslims, representing 1.32% of the country's total population (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Among Muslims in Croatia, the largest ethnic group was Bosniaks (21,119), followed by Croats (10,841) and Albanians (7,421) (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). The presence of Bosniaks in Croatia is also linked to migration from Bosnia and Herzegovina and other parts of the former Yugoslavia, particularly during the second half of the twentieth century. Muslims in Croatia are predominantly Sunni, following the Hanafi school of thought. The Islamic Community of Croatia (ICC) is the only officially registered Islamic religious community in the country (Islamska zajednica u Hrvatskoj, n.d.). The ICC has established cooperation with the government, city, and municipal authorities, as well as relationships with other religious communities. It consists of the Council, the executive body called Meshihat, local Muslim associations, and the Zagreb Islamska gimnazija. The current mufti is Aziz ef. Hasanović (since 2012). In practice, the ICC is an independent religious institution, while maintaining historical, religious, and personnel-based connections with the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Metamodern configurations of “Balkan Islam” as a space of intercultural dialogue

Drawing on Vermeulen & van den Akker's (2010) concept of oscillation, the article adopts a metamodern perspective on the phenomenon of “Balkan Islam” that also foregrounds relationality and the coexistence of seemingly contradictory modes of belonging. Rather than viewing Islamic identities in the Balkans through binary frameworks, such as tradition versus modernity, or local versus global, the metamodern lens allows us to conceptualize them as dynamic configurations shaped by continuous negotiation and reinterpretation.

Within this framework, “Balkan Islam” emerges not as a fixed or homogeneous entity, but as a translocal and processual formation, constituted through the interaction of historical legacies and contemporary transformations. The Ottoman past, often invoked in political and cultural discourses, does not function as a static heritage but as a re-signified symbolic resource, selectively mobilized in present-day identity constructions. At the same time, modern nation-state frameworks,

European integration processes, and global economic networks introduce new layers of meaning, generating a field in which identities are neither fully stabilized nor entirely fragmented.

A key feature of this metamodern condition is the oscillation between embeddedness and openness. On the one hand, Muslim communities in the Balkans remain deeply rooted in local histories, linguistic environments, and institutional traditions. On the other hand, they are increasingly integrated into transnational religious, economic, and cultural networks that connect the region to Turkey, the Arab world, and the broader global Islamic sphere. The dual orientation does not necessarily produce conflict; rather, it creates a productive tension that enables multiple forms of identification to coexist and interact.

Migration plays a central role in this process by continuously reconfiguring the boundaries of belonging. Historical population movements, as well as contemporary mobility and diaspora connections, contribute to the formation of multi-sited identities that transcend national and regional frameworks. In this sense, "Balkan Islam" can be understood as a mediating social space, where different cultural logics intersect and where intercultural dialogue is enacted not only at the institutional level but also in everyday practices.

Importantly, the metamodern perspective also highlights the reflexive dimension of these processes. Actors within the region—religious leaders, intellectuals, policymakers, and community members—actively engage with competing narratives of identity, selectively appropriating elements of tradition, modernity, and globality. Such reflexivity is evident, for example, in how Islamic institutions balance doctrinal continuity with social adaptation, and in how local communities negotiate external influences without fully assimilating them.

Thus, "Balkan Islam," when approached as an analytical construct, can be seen as a site of ongoing mediation, where historical depth and contemporary transformation intersect. Its significance lies not only in its religious dimension but in its capacity to facilitate ethno-social and intercultural dialogue in a region historically marked by plurality and contestation. In this regard, the Balkan case illustrates a broader theoretical insight: that religious formations, when understood as fluid and relational, can function as interfaces of dialogue rather than boundaries of division.

In conclusion, the metamodern optic enables a shift from essentialist and static interpretations toward a more nuanced understanding of "Balkan Islam" as a living, evolving, and dialogical phenomenon. It underscores the importance of embracing complexity, ambiguity, and hybridity as constitutive features of contemporary social realities, particularly in regions shaped by layered histories and ongoing transnational entanglements.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings highlight that Islamic identities in the Balkans have been constituted through long-term interactions between migration processes, imperial legacies, and post-imperial reconfigurations. Rather than representing a unified religious or cultural system, “Balkan Islam” reflects a plural, internally differentiated field in which diverse traditions, institutional arrangements, and identity narratives intersect. This plurality is further intensified in the contemporary period by transnational influences, including the activities of Turkey, the Gulf countries, and global Islamic networks, as well as by ongoing processes of mobility and diaspora formation.

A key contribution of the article lies in demonstrating that “Balkan Islam,” when approached as an analytical construct, functions as a mediating framework of intercultural and ethno-social dialogue. It enables the articulation and negotiation of multiple forms of belonging across ethnic, religious, and political boundaries, thereby contributing to maintaining social cohesion in a historically heterogeneous region. In this sense, the Balkan case illustrates how religious formations can operate not only as markers of difference but also as interfaces of interaction and translation between diverse social worlds.

At the same time, the study underscores the importance of analytical caution in the use of the term “Balkan Islam,” given the diversity and fragmentation of Muslim communities in the region, as emphasized in the existing literature. The concept is most productive when employed not as a descriptive category, but as a heuristic device that captures the interplay of local, imperial, and transnational dimensions in the formation of religious identities.

In conclusion, the metamodern optic allows for a more nuanced interpretation of “Balkan Islam” as a fluid, reflexive, and dialogical phenomenon, characterized by ongoing oscillation between tradition and modernity, locality and globality. Such an approach contributes to broader debates in migration studies and the sociology of religion by demonstrating how complex and historically layered religious formations can serve as key sites of intercultural dialogue in contemporary societies marked by plurality and transformation.

RESEARCH DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The authors state that the article is based on secondary scholarly literature, policy and analytical documents, and publicly available institutional materials and media sources, all of which are cited in the reference list.

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POVZETEK

FENOMEN »BALKANSKEGA ISLAMA« KOT DEJAVNIK MEDKULTURNEGA IN ETNIČNO-SOCIALNEGA DIALOGA

Nina Bilokopytova, Karim El Guessab, Volodymyr Bilokopytov

Avtorji v prispevku obravnavajo pojav »balkanskega islama« kot dejavnik medkulturnega in etnično-socialnega dialoga v kontekstu zgodovinskih migracijskih procesov in koncepta transnacionalnih sprememb. Prizadevajo si za kritično rekonceptualizacijo tega pojma, o katerem zaradi notranje raznolikosti muslimanskih skupnosti na tem območju v strokovni literaturi še vedno potekajo razprave. Avtorji »balkanskega islama« ne obravnavajo kot homogeno ali omejeno celoto, temveč kot analitični konstrukt, ki označuje zgodovinsko vzpostavljeno in kontekstualno pogojeno konfiguracijo verskih praks, institucionalnih oblik in identitetnih narativov, ki se vzpostavljajo na stičišču lokalnih, imperialnih in transnacionalnih vplivov. V metodološkem smislu raziskava temelji na interpretativnem in transnacionalnem pristopu s kombinacijo hermenevitične analize, družbenozgodovinske rekonstrukcije in primerjalne študije primerov. Analizo dopolnjuje še metamoderna perspektiva, ki izpostavlja soobstoj in prepletanje različnih načinov pripadnosti: tradicije in modernosti, lokalnosti in globalnosti, ki so razumljene kot konstitutivne značilnosti balkanske islamske izkušnje.

Študija kaže, da so na vzpostavljanje islamskih identitet na Balkanu bistveno vplivali zaporedni vali migracij, imperialno upravljanje ter postimperialne spremembe. V tem smislu »balkanski islam« odraža medsebojni vpliv več civilizacijskih in etnično-kulturnih plasti, vključno z osmansko institucionalno dediščino, islamskimi tradicijami, slovanskimi etnolingvističnimi formacijami ter širšimi sredozemskimi in srednjeevropskimi vplivi. Takšen preplet je vplival na nastanek kompleksnega družbeno-kulturnega mozaika, o katerem v relevantni literaturi potekajo živahne razprave, zlasti v študijah, ki obravnavajo dolgoročni vpliv osmanske vladavine in njeno reinterpretacijo v sodobnih nacionalnih kontekstih.

Avtorji posebno pozornost namenjajo vlogi migracij kot strukturnega dejavnika pri razširjenosti, institucionalizaciji in notranji diferenciaciji muslimanskih skupnosti. V postosmanskem in postsocialističnem obdobju so se te zgodovinsko ukoreninjene konfiguracije dodatno spreminjale skozi transnacionalne dinamike, vključno z vplivom zunanjih akterjev, kot sta Turčija in zalivske države, ter s širitvijo gospodarskih, kulturnih in verskih omrežij.

Ugotovitve kažejo, da »balkanski islam«, razumljen v tem analitičnem smislu, nima le funkcije označevalca verske identitete, temveč tudi mediacijskega okvira, ki omogoča interakcijo prek etničnih, kulturnih in političnih meja. Predstavlja translokalni družbeni prostor, v katerem se nenehno vzpostavljajo različne oblike pripadnosti. Članek izpostavlja, da lahko verske formacije, če jih obravnavamo kot fluidne in relacijske konstrukte, služijo kot ključna prizorišča medkulturnega dialoga

v zgodovinsko pluralnih in nenehno spreminjajočih se regijah, s čimer prispeva k razpravam na področjih študij migracij in sociologije religije.

ČLANKI / ARTICLES

Janja Žitnik Serafin

Uvodnik: Inštitut za slovensko izseljenstvo in migracije to jesen praznuje štiridesetletnico priključitve k ZRC SAZU

Urh Šelih

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