

Black Turk – Magnificent Sultan: Turkish Images on the Balkans Today

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There is generally a negative image of the Turk – as arch-enemy – in Balkan countries. Yet this image refers less to real Turks than to different ethno-linguistic and religious neighbour groups, who are seen as more ‘Asiatic’ and less ‘European’ than oneself. Real Turks and the Turkish tradition – especially among Muslims – are rather admired. These images are constructions of high culture, albeit with sometimes dire consequences for all and sundry in times of conflict.

We have to emphasize the fact that, in the Balkans, history is not so much a science as a constructive element in the process of nation formation and an essential structure of national consciousness.¹

Muslims in Europe are not ghosts but hosts.²

1. Introduction

Whether the Balkans are a powder keg threatening Europe’s stability and prosperity or whether the Balkans’ multicultural background, the linguistic, ethnic and religious diversity of its populations proffers a chance for a new kind of Europeanness cannot be answered here. But we may trace some images of the Other as an enemy and its identification with the Turk and show their randomness and variations. These images are relative to time and space. Muslim Bosniaks and catholic Dalmatians will obviously differ in their conception of an Ottoman past as well as of contemporary Turkey. Before going into details we shall analyse some lexical images.

2. Who is the ‘Turk’?

The meaning of the nouns *turčin* or *turak* is not ‘Turk’, but ‘Muslim’. In Bosnia especially it denotes a Slav belonging to the Muslim faith and thereby the Muslim ‘Status’ nation. For a Slav to become Muslim meant going through the process of *turčiti se* (become a Turk) and to live in (Turkish style) *turkovati*.³ A ‘real Turk’ from the Ottoman Empire and from contemporary Turkey would be called *Turče* or *Turkuša*. The Serbian

philologist and language reformer Vuk Karadžić defined such a person as a Turk who doesn't speak Serbian, *turca affirmatus*.⁴ The term 'Ottoman' we find only in literature or historiography but never in oral literature or conversation. Today, these fine distinctions have somewhat been worn away and *turčin* as well as *turak* or *turkuša* or, worse, *balija*, are derogatory for 'Muslim'. When Serbian general Ratko Mladić entered the UN enclave of Srebrenica he proclaimed: 'Finally the time for revenge on the Turks has arrived.'⁵ The etymology of *balija* is somewhat obscure, but the meaning is extremely derogatory: uncouth Muslim nomad, primitive Muslim peasant and lastly any Muslim from Bosnia. The term was also applied by gentrified Muslim city dwellers 'on primitive Muslim peasants'. Lovrenović in this context cites *Ne zna balija što je halija* (the peasant doesn't know a fine Persian kelim).⁶ The animosity between Muslim Bosniaks and Bosnian Ottomans has been especially noted.⁷ The war in Bosnia (1992–1995) has been duly interpreted as a conflict between higher urban Ottoman and lower rural (mostly Christian, but also Muslim) cultures.⁸ One could also call it a conflict between wealthy educated city dwellers and archaic poor villagers. In the opinion of Lovrenović, the three Bosnian cultures: Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim, intermingle in their lower spheres only, whereas their higher forms are mutually exclusive or, in other words, a 'clash of identity from above and identity from below'.^{8,9} Vuk Karadžić has *Turca per convicium* and the phrase: *Ne zna Balija što je Zdravo Marija* (the Turk doesn't know the Hail Mary).⁴ Since the war in Bosnia, *balija* has been the standard term of abuse employed by both Croatian and Serbian sides. Thereby, it has changed its focus from rural Muslim culture to any Bosnian with a Muslim sounding surname or anybody fighting for the Federal Bosnian Army. Names are all important in the Balkans: everybody can know another's nationality, political and religious affiliation by his surname and first name. During the last war in Bosnia, refugees or hostages without documents were made to cite prayers as a shibboleth or inspected for circumcision or tattoos (see below) in order to determine their nationality. The 'enemy' as such was called *dušman*, a Turkism meaning just that, by all three sides in this war.

The term Balkan is a Turkish loanword replacing the antique Haimos.¹⁰ It is impossible today to use the term Balkan neutrally only in its geographical meaning, since its demarcation line in the north, where no natural boundary exists, is crucial for the respective fates of Slovenia and Croatia in belonging or not belonging to the Balkans. Belonging means being more 'Oriental' and thus less European. From the inside perspective the degree of Balkanness is minimal in the Slovenes and increases with the Croats, Serbs, Montenegrins, Bulgarians, Greek and finally Turks. The historical definition of the Balkans comprehends the former European territory of the Ottoman Empire. Common concepts of the Balkans as a place of uncivilization, corruption, nationalism and blood thirst are older than Metternich's famous, if unattested *aperçu* that the 'Balkan begins on the Rennweg' in Vienna's third district. For most people living in South Eastern Europe the term 'Balkan' in itself is derogatory. When inhabitants of the Balkan Peninsula criticize someone's uncouth 'balkanic' behaviour or speak of some 'Balkan' nation they always aim at somebody else. For the Croats it's the Bosnians, for the Bosnians the Serbs, for the Serbs the Albanians and so on.

The only positive concept of The Balkans and of 'Balkanness' is found in Bulgaria, whose mountain range *Staraja Planina* gave it the name. Here, Balkan means natural

beauty, autochthon culture and resistance against the Ottoman forces and, therefore, in short the typical national landscape. The Balkan Mountains were a favourite hiding place for Bulgarian armed resistance and for the Hajduks making it into an anti-Ottoman national monument. Whether one regards the Hajduks as common thieves and robbers or as Balkan Robin Hoods depends largely on one's cultural background. A traditional Balkan kitchen, however, is, according to Chef Kaneva Johnson, the 'real autochthon food of times before the Ottomans'.¹¹ Culinary culture is here, as everywhere, an all important element of cultural identity. This is especially valid in a region as ethnically and culturally mixed as the Balkans.

The concept of 'Balkanization' on the other hand is generally derogatory. The Bulgarian author Todorova claims that all the stereotypical bad behaviour on the Balkans has been acquired from the Turks in Ottoman times.¹² According to her this also applies to the typically Balkanese identification of nations and religious affiliations. Bosniaks are Muslims, Croatians are Catholics, Serbs are Orthodox and so on. This, Todorova, like many others, derives from the Ottoman millet system.¹² She fails to explain, however, why 150 years have not been sufficient to construct other means of identity and where this concept files other indigene or immigrant Balkan peoples such as the Aromuns, Roma, Sephardim, Pomaks or Gagauz. It also doesn't answer the question of why there was, and still is, no solidarity between different Muslims groups in the Balkans. No help came from Bosnia to Kosovo during the war and vice versa. Today, the Muslim Albanians terrorize the Muslim Gorani in Kosovo and the orthodox Serbs help them (see below).

3. Turkish Vestiges on the Balkan: The Example of Bosnia

There are many Turkish words still in use in Balkan languages. The whole topic was and is highly politicized. Some scholars prefer the terms 'Orientalisms' or 'Islamisms' to 'Turkisms' since they want also to include Arabic and Persian influences.¹³ Others speak of 'Balkanisms' in order not to 'alienate' these words from their region of emergence and because they have frequently assumed different pronunciations and meanings on the Balkans.¹³ Analyses of normative dictionaries of the time of the fights for national independence and thus for linguistic purity (~ 1880s) vary greatly. Numbers for Turkisms in Albanian oscillate between 1180 and 3000, for Serbo-Croatian about 8700 and for Bulgarian between 850 and 10,000.¹⁴ Turkisms of varying subject matter found their way into the Balkan languages via the domination of an ethnically mixed Muslim elite in the cities, by transfer from the ethnic Turkish settlers and finally by contact with nomad Turks (i.e. Yörüks in Macedonia), Roman speaking Vlachs and also Roma for whom Turkish was a *lingua franca*. The intellectual and religious elite of the Balkans was often trained in Istanbul and so made Turkisms fashionable at home.

This process is being reversed both in quality and quantity in almost all Balkan languages since the end of the nineteenth century. The reasons are manifold: emigration of Turks, Reorientation towards the West and linguistic purgings.¹⁵ Turkisms became hate signs and symbols of the former Ottoman rule. The second Yugoslavia forbade not only 'Turkish' customs, such as the wearing of the veil or circumcision, it also closed religious schools and purged dictionaries and schoolbooks of 'Islamisms'. A third wave

of purgings happened in the 1990s, because the new nation states of the former-Yugoslavia had to assert themselves against Yugoslav supranationalism. The one Balkan country where the retreat of Turkisms is being reversed is Bosnia with its majority Bosniak Muslim population. After the splitting of Yugoslavia, the major peoples (Slovenians, Croats, Serbs, and Macedonians) standardized their national languages and purged them again. The former ‘Serbo-Croatian’ (a term introduced by the Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy in the 1880s for political reasons) was now no longer acceptable. The appellation ‘Bosnian’ (also introduced by the Austrians in 1890) was revived in 1992 as the designation of a Bosnian standard language, held to be indivisible from Islamic culture and Ottoman tradition.¹⁶ Besides the former’s wealth of reactivated Turkisms, the main characteristics that differentiate Bosnian from Serbian and Croatian are rather few. They boil down to phonetics, especially to the Arab elongation ‘h’ (meko – mehko, lako – lahko). Most of this is unacceptable to the majority of Serbs and Croats and therefore the future of Turkish in the Balkans is intertwined with the future of the Bosnian language *bosanski*.

4. Turks on the Balkans

Most southern European national concepts ignore the presence of Turkish tribes long before the Ottoman expansion. Bulgarian identity concepts tend to deny the fact that the proto-Bulgar founders of the Bulgarian empire in the seventh century were not Slavs but Oghur Turks who had recently left the Volga region. The Bulgarian empire became Slavicized only around 1000. The Bulgarian emperor Simeon later invited Pechenegs to fight against the Magyars. They were followed by several other peoples related to the Turks. The question of whether there were still Turkish speakers in place to meet the Ottoman conquerors in the fourteenth century is fiercely debated by Bulgarian historians and philologists. Also crucial to nationalistic concepts in the Balkans is whether conversion to Islam occurred voluntarily or by force or bribes. Unfortunately, this doesn’t pertain merely to historical controversies but also to government policies dealing with religious and ethnic minorities today.

During the Ottoman reign the Other – according to most of the Christian populations, the so-called *raja* – was their foreign oppressor, the Turk. Nationalist antagonism of the elites was directed against him whereas neighbours even in case of a different nationality were brothers in opposition against the Ottomans.¹⁷ All modern national constructs in South-Eastern Europe are *per definitionem* ethnic and not political constructions as they are in Middle and West European countries. National movements therefore relied on ethnic differentiation and thus needed the construction of a hostile Other. One’s own national identity is considered indivisible as opposed to the many different Others of the neighbouring enemies.¹⁷ This is again interpreted by many authors as a consequence of the Ottoman millet system. By being turned into *raja* in the middle of the fifteenth century the whole south eastern Slavia is said to have been exposed to an ongoing process of colonization and assimilation. This interpretation is still of paramount importance in today’s nationalist historical discourses. It has to be conceded, however, that the Ottoman Turk, who was merely a danger and a terror for the rest of Europe, has been a strict master for the Christian *raja* on the Balkans for many centuries.

5. The Image of the Turk

The prevalent picture Christian Slavs have of the Ottoman rule in South-Eastern Europe is that infidels from the East invaded, oppressed and tyrannized the autochthonous Christians for half a millennium. This is said to have led to their division from the West and Western civilizational progress and still to be the reason for all backwardness, poverty and ongoing conflicts in the Balkans today (Ref. 7, p. 38). Every group sees this negative form of Turkishness especially in their eastern neighbour. Muslim Bosniaks, according to their prevalent public opinion, are Turks in spirit and culture, but not in their genes, which are those of the autochthonous Slavs or of the pre-Slav indigenous population depending on the favoured historical concept. Mustafa Cerić, the Bosnian *reis-ul-ulema*, brought this to the point: ‘We [Bosnia] are no longer a small country, vulnerable to attack; instead, we are part of a great nation .. Turkey’.¹⁸ Bosnia’s process in cultural identification with Turkey is ongoing. Here, the Ottoman past and its heroes are glorified. Turkish soap operas, especially historical ones, empty the streets. Sulejman the Magnificent is a new national hero and *Sulejmanija* a new colloquialism. But not so in Serbia, where the capital is littered with posters stamped by the nationalist party stating ‘Sulejman is spit – Obilić (the defender of Kosovo against the Ottomans in 1388) is great’. The Serbs are (according to Croatian and Bosniak public opinion) genetic Turks speaking a Slavonic language because the Turks violated their women and took away their sons to become Janissaries. This discourse implies that Serbian self-hatred because of this hidden genetic background causes special aggression towards Muslims (Figure 1).

According to Croat public opinion, Balkan peoples tend to have a higher degree of Turkishness the further to the East they live (Bosniaks, Serbs, Bulgarians, Albanians ...). Having a higher degree of Turkishness is the equivalent of being the Other to a higher degree. In Serbian public opinion, the most Turkish of them all are the Albanians with about 70% Muslims and the Bosniaks with 40% Muslims; here, religious affiliation – not geographical location – is crucial. Using this argument, over 200,000 Albanians have been deported as ‘Turks’ from Kosovo to Turkey between 1953 and 1966.¹⁹ According to Ditchev, these images also have a solid political dividend: painting one’s neighbour as the ‘Black Turk’ makes oneself more ‘white’ and European and thus the better candidate for membership in the EC.²⁰

6. The ‘Turk’ on Paper. The Example of Croatia

The image of the ‘Black Turk’ as the Arch-Enemy was deliberately perpetuated in the national literatures and historiographies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was central to the ‘national awakening’ of the South-East European peoples and to the construction of their independent nation states. At the core of this image stands the equation *dušman* = Turk = Muslim = Bosniak = Serb = Albanian. In the recent war in the former Yugoslavia (1991–1995) the Muslim Bosniaks were assigned by the other parties the place of the hated Turk. Fear and demonization characterized Croatian Osmanism, which was meant to rouse the whole of Christendom to ‘holy war’. The *Molitva suprotiva Turkom* by Croatia’s greatest humanist Marulić tells a horrible tale of forced conversions to Islam and atrocities against civilians. When Pope John Paul II



Figure 1. Konstantin Makovsky. *The Bulgarian Martyresses*. This picture, dating from 1877, depicts the rape of Bulgarian women by *bashi bazouks*, and was aimed at mobilizing public support for the Russo–Turkish war (1877–1878) waged with the proclaimed aim of liberating the Bulgarians from the ottoman yoke (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Konstantin_Makovsky_-_The_Bulgarian_martyresses.jpg#filelinks).

visited Croatia in 1994 at the height of the Croatian conflict with Bosnian Muslim forces, he was presented with a copy of Marulić's pamphlet (Ref. 7, p. 4). This symbolic present was to create a bridge not only between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries but also between the former Ottoman archenemy and the Muslim Bosniak of today. From the sixteenth century, the *exhortatio* stereotype of the infidel Turk as the scourge of God gradually gave way to *descriptio*, a general interest in things Turkish as in Gundulić's major epic 'Osman'. The turning point between these attitudes is considered to have been the unsuccessful second siege of Vienna by the Ottomans in 1683. From then on, there was a rising hope in Croat literature for a decline of Ottoman rule, reinforced by the Austrian victories of the early eighteenth century (Ref. 7, p. 18). The movement of Illyrism or Pan-Slavism had a twofold picture of the Turk. While Ottoman modernization and Europeanization was lauded, it sympathized with the 'Turk' – read Muslim Bosniak – in his struggle against Ottoman rule.²¹ The true enemy of the pan-Slavist Southern Slavs, and especially the Croats, was now no longer the Ottoman Empire but the growing Magyar nationalism in Hungary, to which Croatia was annexed. The climax of the Croatian exhortation against the Turkish enemy is the epic 'Smrt Smail-age Čengića' by the poet Mažuranić published in 1846. The Muslim aristocrat and government official Čengić is depicted as a greedy fiend and sadist rightly slain by brave Hajduks. This text is still mandatory reading in Croatian schools whose history textbooks have been dutifully 'politically corrected' in preparation for Croatia's accession to the EC.²² Ivo Andrić, the famous Bosnia born writer and Nobel laureate, compares the bell towers of orthodox and catholic churches and the minarets of mosques in Bosnia to knives sticking into the sky thinking badly about each other every day. In his doctoral dissertation 'Development of the spiritual life in Bosnia under the influence of Turkish rule' he argued that Islam in every way hindered the cultural development in Bosnia and kept it backwards for half a millennium.²³ Contemporary writers such as Aralica and his opponent Jergović aim at showing Croatia's right to former Turkish territories in Bosnia or the positive Croatian cultural influence on Bosnia.²⁴

Catholic Bosnians, both men and especially women, often wear ornamental 'tribal tattoos'. They are rare now, but most frequently worn by people over 50. All consist of tiny crosses that usually cover the hands and arms and sometimes also the collar bone. When asked about their special meaning the answers amount to this: now it is just a custom but in former times we tattooed our children so that they would not forget their faith and home in case the Turks took them away (Figure 2). Possibly this is an aspect of oral history concerning the Turkish custom of *devşirme* (taking Christian boys away for education, conversion and inclusion into the Janissaries).

7. Examples of Turkish/Muslim Groups

'Real' Turks have become rare on the Balkans. In predominantly Muslim areas they assimilated with local Muslims and in Christian countries they were repressed or deported after the First World War. Conservative estimates speak of about 87% of the ethnic Turks on the Balkans who either perished or emigrated. The Pomaks of Bulgaria and the Gagauz of the shores of the Black Sea are here given as examples of still extant 'Turkish' groups because they are mirror images of each other. The Pomaks are



Figure 2. Tattoos (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/57981868@N08/7021065405/>).

Slavic-speaking Slavs adhering to Islam, the Gagauz are an orthodox Christian Turk group speaking a variant of Turkish. Their problems of changing self-determination versus assigned-determination are similar to these of other Balkan Muslims, such as the Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Sandžak, the Torbesh of Macedonia as well as the Tartars and Yürüks. The Gorani and Albanians in Kosovo and Albania are a special case since they pose an argument against the traditional Balkan pairing of religion and nation. The Gorani in the mountains of southern Kosovo are a Serbian speaking group of Muslims and in many ways similar to the Pomaks. They are, however, not accepted as brethren in faith by the Muslim Albanians but rather driven out of their houses and jobs, deprived of education and medical care and thus forced to emigrate to Serbia or even liquidated as Serbs. The only humanitarian help they receive comes from Serbia.

Muslims are the largest minority group in Orthodox Bulgaria. According to the National Census of 2011, 9% of the total population gave their mother tongue as 'Turkish' and 4% as 'Pomak'. All censuses on the Balkans are based on 'declarational nationality'. People are accordingly afraid of the consequences for declaring the 'wrong nationality'. Numbers are therefore unreliable and the percentages given by the Bulgarian Census have to be taken with a grain of salt.²⁵ According to the Bulgarian ministerial department for minorities, the number of Pomaks was significantly higher in 2001, namely about 8%, due to the fact that no difference was then made between Turks and Pomaks.²⁶ One-percent of the population declared themselves as Roma and gave their religious orientation as Muslim. Thus, the quota of Muslims in Bulgaria comes to a minimum of 14%. This percentage would be even higher if Bulgarian Muslims had not been repressed since the Balkan wars of the early twentieth century and expelled in several major waves of 'Repatriation to Turkey'. The aim of such measures was the conversion of the Muslims to Orthodox Christianity and to Bulgarian culture, including changes in their first names, surnames, costumes, and so on. The official reason given for this was that these 'ethnic Slavs' had been forced to 'enturk' themselves in the Ottoman Empire and were now led back to their origins.

Almost all of the Bulgarian Muslim community live in the Rhodope mountains. The most conservative community is settled in their western part where mostly vegetables and tobacco are grown, sheep, goats and cows are kept and some weaving is done by the women. Pomaks have been settled since time immemorial in their present environment, where they have developed a distinct alpine culture. Muslim Bulgarians today are generally called 'Pomak', but also 'Poturnak' – enturked 'Poganets' – infidel (Figure 3). The difficulties of describing these people and interpreting their identities start with the name. The etymology of the term 'Pomak' is unsure and interpreted by every side at will. The word sounds like the All Slavic *pomaknuti* – to change one's position or place. Christian orthodox sources tend to interpret it as 'collaborators' (from allslavic 'pomagati' – to help) 'people who have suffered' or 'martyrs'. After the Perestroika, the trend of conversion to Christianity has increased. Whole villages are changing names and religion in order to improve their chances at jobs and education. But the Rhodopes also partly belong to Greece, making for a considerable Pomak minority there. Many Greek Pomaks have also settled in Turkey. Today and in the past these people have been troubled in their identity. Most sources, such as the official Pomak site on the internet, define themselves as a separate ethnic group different from the Bulgarian, Greek or Turkish roots their neighbours usually attribute them.²⁷ They regard themselves as 'Thracians' and thus as representatives of the autochthonous pre-Slav and pre-Turkish population of Bulgaria. Being the 'first inhabitants' and claiming the status of 'aboriginal roots' are all important in the Balkans. The construction of a national consciousness and nation states is always related to an 'aboriginal people' seen as the direct forefathers of the current nation. From this priority status may easily be derived the right to deport other people who are 'not indigenous' and to conquer lands said to have belonged to one's own ancestors.²⁸

For reasons of expediency, the Pomaks sometimes employ one identity officially and another privately. After Bulgaria joined the European Community, the Bulgarian Pomak's use of a Turkish identity has significantly receded. The Bulgarian construction

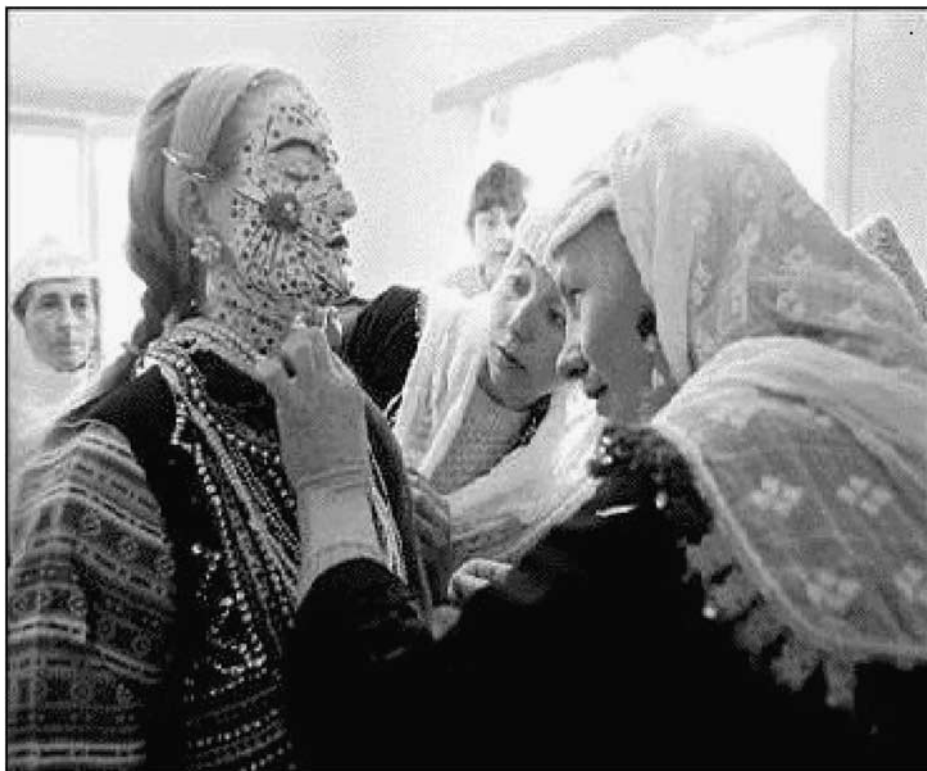


Figure 3. Pomaks (<http://gora8.tripod.com/id65.htm>).

of Pomak national identity is also changing rapidly. After having formerly been forced to emigrate as ‘ethnic Turks’, they are now emphatically claimed as Bulgarians and the same can be said of their folklore. Turkish and Islamic sources nevertheless continue to interpret the Pomaks as descendents of the Ottomans.²⁹ Some studies have been made on the genetics of Pomaks but as usual in this field with no conclusive results. Pomaks tend to be tall, blonde and blue eyed, and are therefore sometimes also called ‘white Bulgarians’.

The Gagauz (Figure 4) are a small Turkish people scattered over Moldova, Bulgaria, Greece, Ukraine and Rumania. There are several theories about their origins: one describes them as descendents of Turkic nomads from the Eurasian steppes, another as Anatolian Seljuks. Bulgarian scientists define the Gagauz as ethnic Bulgarians who were ‘enturked’ in the past but nonetheless managed to stick to their Orthodox Christian faith. Demirdirek, writing about the Gagauz nation building process in Moldova, states that according to these constructs Moldova had originally been settled by Gagauz, thus showing that the quest for antiquity and aboriginal status is no Balkan specialty.³⁰ Moldavian nationalism fears a Gagauz ‘return’ to Islam and thereby an autonomous Muslim ‘Gagauz autonomous republic’ within Moldavia’s borders. The internet is bringing Christian and Muslim Gagauz organizations into contact. Whether this new collaboration will result in a rapprochement with Turkey remains to be seen.



Figure 4. Gagauz: http://www.rferl.org/content/moldovas_gagauz_autonomous_region_struggles_to_find_a_common_language_with_chisinau/24285661.html.

Conclusion

The Ottoman/Turk as the Other is a concept of ‘High Culture’ as in literary texts or art. Nowadays, the former archenemy has fallen from high to popular culture where he had a soft landing. The ‘Turk’ of current historical novels as in Jergović is not the frightening fiend one met before but rather a nuisance swept away by time. The hated *turčin* of popular culture is never the Ottoman but instead the (Muslim) neighbour. The Turk *turca affirmatus* frequently met in the Balkans nowadays is a businessman from the ‘Dogus group’ supposed to save the Croatian local economy, and there are characters such as Onur, Šeherezade or Sulejman of Turkish soap operas. In Croatia, such glamorous Turks are highly popular and children have been named in their honour. Newspapers have recipes from Sulejman’s kitchen on their front pages.

A positive stereotype of the Balkans is that of a bridge between East and West. In addition, a liberal Islam has been originated there which is or has been compatible with both sides. We hope that this bridge is going to be reconstructed, just as was the famous bridge in Mostar, destroyed by the Croats in their fight against the Bosniaks.

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15. Compare the purging of Anglicisms and Gallicisms in Austria and Germany during and after the First and Second World Wars.
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28. The Bulgarian national holiday on 3 March celebrates the treaty of San Stefano ending the Russo–Turkish war (1877–1878) and, in Bulgarian understanding, the end of the Turkish yoke. Compare the current Serbian argument that Kosovo is the cradle of the Holy Serbian state and therefore cannot be relinquished to the Albanians who came much later in the wake of the Ottomans.
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