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Essay

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# The Image of the Stranger in Post-Yugoslav Films

Renate Hansen-Kokoruš\*

Films produced during the last two decades in the post-Yugoslav states<sup>1</sup> often deal with the subject of these states' recent history, focusing on the war and its consequences for human beings, as well as the consequences of political and economic transition, such as an increasing wealth gap, criminality, lack of perspectives, unemployment etc. The methods of presentation and modality range from the serious to the comical and grotesque. As these films reflect in special ways people's new situation in the new post-Yugoslav countries, questions of self-image, understanding of oneself and of the cruel experiences of war are of utmost importance. The cultural, psychological and political positions of the countries that formerly belonged to Yugoslavia came into new focus with the fall of the Iron Curtain and the breakup of Yugoslavia, while the relationship between East and West staggered and required repositioning. However, in this time the political, economic and psychological situation of the West, especially of Central Europe, also changed fundamentally; this was noticed from outside, from the regions affected by war and poverty as a result of closing their borders.<sup>2</sup> Cultural studies, history and anthropology, and to a certain degree also literature, noticed this tense relationship between Eastern and Western influences as basic for the Western understanding of the Balkans as the (European) East and Orienta<sup>3</sup>; and the self-understanding of the Balkans as exotic.<sup>4</sup> In these works the border between East and West is not understood as fixed or as a binary opposition, but rather as a fluid phenomenon

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<sup>1</sup> The term "Balkan cinema" introduced by Dina Iordanova (in Iordanova, Dina. 2001. *Cinema of Flames. Balkan Film, Culture and the Media*. London: Palgrave Macmillan) is much broader, because it also concerns Romanian, Greek, Bulgarian, Turkish and other cinemas of Southeast Europe, which do not constitute a single cinema tradition. Even if it is not used in a pejorative sense, implied by the term "the Balkans" (cf. Todorova, Maria N. 1997. *Imagining the Balkans*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press.); the term "Balkan cinema" will be avoided for the abovementioned reasons; nevertheless, this is not connected to the problem of the image of the self, of "self-balkanization" (cf. Bakić-Hayden, Maria. 1995. Nesting Orientalisms. The Case of former Yugoslavia. *Slavic Review* 54(4), 917-31), but should consider the objectives of commonalities and differences.

<sup>2</sup> Loshitzky names the tension of excluding migrants from Europe "Fortress Europe," in Loshitzky, Yosefa. 2010. *Screening Strangers. Migration and Diaspora in Contemporary European Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1-13.

<sup>3</sup> Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*; also Goldsworthy, Vesna. 1998. *Inventing Ruritania. The Imperialism of the Imagination*. New Haven; London: Hurst Publishers.

<sup>4</sup> Bakić-Hayden, *Nesting Orientalisms*.

of meandering and shaping projections. Images of modern and backward, new and traditional, urban and rural, individual and collective, which seemed to symbolize categories of the West and the East, had to be rethought. Based on these new approaches to the understanding of cultural differences, film analyses were focused on the phenomenon of Balkanism and self-balkanization: on the image of the Balkans in film (for example as the Wild East, the exotic Oriental etc.), of strong and heroic masculinity, of homophobia, and of exotic ethnic groups like the Roma etc. In these works, two aspects are central: the Western gaze, how the West imagines culture and the history of the 'Balkans' and its inhabitants, and the self-image of the Balkans - how the inhabitants understand and explain themselves, and how they think. Surprisingly one aspect arises only marginally: how Southeast European films perceive and depict the other, the unknown, the foreigner, who is very often a Westerner. Two selected aspects of this concept will take center stage.

The following will examine the category of the stranger in selected films, which is connected to the image of one's own identity. Using contrasts with the other, which is often shown in a negative sense, the self as the positive value system is emphasized. In view of this relationship and its functions, it is not surprising that foreigners in films are not unique. We can distinguish between different categories of foreigners:

1. The person from another country who comes on business or by order and lives temporarily in the post-Yugoslav country;
2. The foreigner who comes for private reasons;
3. The emigrant from former Yugoslavia who, returning temporarily, looks at his former homeland through the eyes of a foreigner;
4. The foreigner crossing the border from an economically or politically underdeveloped country on his way to the West;
5. The inhabitant of former Yugoslavia who now, due to the wars and the politics of new nation-building, inhabits a different post-Yugoslav country;
6. The unseen foreigner as a projection of the other;
7. In a very broad sense the discovery of something alien, strange, misunderstood or unknown in the supposedly well-known system of one's own.

Only a few of the addressed aspects (1, 4) can be taken into consideration; most of them, especially broader topics, need a more detailed analysis.

The first category, strangers from other countries who stay in the post-Yugoslav country for a while, is the most profiled one, because these people can be recognized very easily by external characteristics as being those who do not belong to the national culture and society. The most obvious distinction is language: the foreigner does not use the local language - only in some cases

does he speak broken Bosnian, Croatian or Serbian. In most cases, English, with a certain degree of fluency, serves as the language of communication with the local inhabitants, but also between foreigners. Often the foreigner is a member of an international organization (e.g. UNPROFOR, IFOR, or from a non-profit organization with humanitarian aims if the film deals with recent topics), a journalist, a politician, or works for a foreign-based company. Uniforms, icons, logos and trademarks on clothes and cars, as well as professional work equipment like cameras, film cameras etc. are significant; using metonymical or symbolic functions in the films, they refer to the group or organization to which the foreigners belong. Some examples will make this category more explicit.

The antiwar film *No Man's Land* (*Ničija zemlja*), directed by Danis Tanović, which in 2002 won an Oscar for the best screenplay, a Golden Globe and more than 40 international film awards, has been the most-awarded post-Yugoslav film. This film often used the attitudes of an intimate play and is of great interest to our question because it shows different aspects of foreigners.

The story takes place in a dugout in no man's land in Bosnia during the war in the 1990s, where two Bosnian Muslim and two Bosnian-Serb soldiers come to a clash, which ends in a duel between the two mobile survivors. Because of a mine trap placed under a seemingly dead Bosnian soldier, international help is required. In this context, many foreigners are shown in different ways from the view of the Bosnian soldier Čiki, the protagonist of the film. The concrete storyline reveals an allegoric meaning of the chronotope of captivity: the common captivity of all ordinary soldiers of both sides in a godforsaken Bosnian landscape, forgotten by the West and only passively viewed by international political actors. Nevertheless, in addition to the negative fundamental image of the West, the film also underlines differences between the foreigners. The UNPROFOR is criticized figuratively and fundamentally for its role as a passive voyeur instead of actively stopping war actions. The understanding of the UNPROFOR as a group of voyeurs, taken from the point of view of the film's protagonists, is emphasized by showing their soldiers observing with binoculars from a safe distance, far from the frontline.

Using such stereotypes, the film nevertheless shows differences in the hierarchy of the organization: the common UNPROFOR sergeant, a Frenchman, informs his commander who is cynical and not interested in his duties. He is oversimplified as a man misusing his position for personal needs and enjoying its comfort - in contrast to the common officer at the front. The commander has everything the soldiers lack: he is far away from the front, in a comfortable office, having sex with a subordinate, without stress; at the end he gives a press conference where he spews canned phrases about the successful peace process. Real problems like the mine bore or disturb him, so he decides to do nothing and not to call for help. However, help is organized due to the courage of an English TV reporter and the French sergeant, who differ greatly from their colleagues. Journalists and reporters are nearly caricatured as belonging to a profession that deals with their subject, the mediation of information throughout the world, without ethical principles (e.g. to inform about breaches of law, injustice, threats of human life etc., with the aim of developing independent people with political consciousness). In contrast, most

journalists' work is shown as deeply rooted in competitiveness and oriented towards the successful placing of their reports on the world market of information. War in the former Yugoslavia is shown as exotic but close to Central Europe, where reporters provide records of disasters as sensational news. Their purpose is to get exclusive information faster than their colleagues, and to sell it faster and at a higher price; chasing disasters is their way of making money, rather than investigative journalism, which is not profitable and sometimes even risky. Therefore reporters are shown as always busy, in a kind of race to be the first at the place of a catastrophe, depicting an image of greed and obsession with human suffering. This professional group in the film possesses the characteristics of amorality; only the female English reporter has not only the will to uncover secret affairs and scandals, but also the drive to help the people about whom she is reporting. With her relentless requests for decisions from the UNPROFOR, she starts an initiative for requiring a mine expert, and in an interview with the commander it is she who asks uncomfortable questions about his humanitarian motivations; she (like the sergeant) shows that even a courageous individual can bring about change. The relief operation is not successful, because the perfidious mine trap cannot be deactivated. (As the viewer notes, the mines are "made in EU"; the European Union, too, is blamed for the cruelty of war.) *No Man's Land* shows important foreign people and institutions as powerless or even alien: (1) they do not have a political mandate for intervention strikes (UNPROFOR); (2) even with their technical skills they are powerless against perfidious/perverse ideas (deactivator for mines); (3) they are ignorant because their own comfort is their main focus (commander), or (4) they are not interested in changing the situation, because their profession relies on disasters (reporters). In contrast to this negative image of Westerners, the English reporter and the French sergeant are the only foreigners to show sympathy with the soldiers on the front (as well as with the land and its people). The film appreciates their commitment as a fundamental necessity. But there is one more detail concerning the UNPROFOR mandate: twice we view a murder. (The third murder, of Cera, the soldier lying over the mine, is not shown, but prolonged after the end of the film and cannot be ignored.) The last murder seen is carried out by an unnamed soldier of UNPROFOR who tries to stop the raging protagonist Čiki from attacking Nino and himself by shooting him. This critical comment on their mandate concerning their own well-being underlines the argument of Western passivity and lack of emotion toward the suffering of the Balkan people.

While foreigners in this film show positive emotions when they are in closer contact with the locals, the tragicomedy *Fuse (Gori vatra)* by Pjer Žalica from 2003, places emphasis on the reflection of their own identity and the critical-ironic re-evaluation of the relationship between locals and foreigners. Normalization and reconciliation between Bosnians and Bosnian Serbs are not realized in post-war Bosnia where the story is set; these are the requests of outsiders: of politicians, their staff members and the members of IFOR. The remigrants suffer for the faith in the never-realized ideal of reconciliation with their physical or psychological health. The locals, Bosnians and Serbs, are still in a kind of war (at least they distrust and even hate each other, reinforcing many stereotypes about the other). In the little town Tešanj in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the smallest village of which is part of the Serbian

Republic (Republika srpska), there are ruins everywhere serving as signs of the war. Under the post-war conditions, and with the “new market” of neoliberal economic politics of societies in transition, social life functions only superficially; in fact there is high unemployment, corruption, people trafficking, prostitution and black market activities - all camouflaged with exotic elements under which a common hopelessness can be seen. The town is represented by its mayor, who accepts the proposal of the international community to realize a project of “peace building” and develop a new community of all national groups as the model of a new epoch of peace and democracy. At its climax, the American president Bill Clinton will visit the town and this - so the inhabitants hope - will boost their economy. The foreigners are, after the Bosnians and the Serbs, not only the third party, but also the initiators and motors of the story line. The representatives of UNPROFOR and other Western political institutions with civic goals for developing a civil society in the damaged post-war country come in order to realize political programs for the region based on decisions from international organizations on the level of the EU or the UN. These specialists in their fields receive a short introduction into the basics of the political and cultural specificities of the region, but they do not really have an understanding of the real situation, so they are out of their depth. They view the Balkans from the outside, and it is the folkloristic view of the privileged Westerners, seen from the perspective of the locals. In this perception the Balkan people - from the point of view of the foreigners - are wild, impossible to understand, bloodthirsty and unpredictable; that is why they had been killing one another. The foreigners show no sympathy for the locals, but empathy arises only in a folkloristic celebration, in an orgiastic party in which Balkan directness and impulsiveness dominate; the foreigners love this, but for private purposes they are connected in their own community.

Actions of reconciliation are requested, as shown by the example of the Austrian supervisor, played by the Austrian Hubert Kramar: he demands that the former warring parties, now presented as the Serbian and the Bosnian fire brigades, make peace. This is reminiscent of little children making up after an argument. The concerned locals do not really want to be in closer contact, but they have to act like peace-loving people to get what they want. It is a *mise en abyme*: All inhabitants are acting in a strange comedy within the film. The town is a stage for the foreigners; it is all smoke and mirrors, the simulation of a multicultural society, including its most notable persons. As a result, documents disappear that could bear witness to the contrary, and the pimp and black market businessman manages a folklore group (consisting of his prostitutes, now in Balkan dresses). So-called “remigrants” stage a happy return to their repaired homes and show pride in their cultural heritage, which the enemy had saved from attacks from barbaric people. This happy idyll, which will disappear when the foreigners leave, meets the foreign stereotypes of the locals as happy and exotic Balkan people, with their folklore, wild collective dances, nice women and angry, dangerous men, with a welcoming heart for guests and fraternization with unknown people, accompanied by lots of booze. Even if it seems to be easy to satisfy the foreigners’ expectations, as well as to mess around with them, the notable persons erred egregiously. The supervisor who repeats his opinion again and again and who wants to convict the locals in fundamental peacemaking is not stupid or naive, as the locals

would think. They do not seriously believe that he wants to get closer to them, and they do not value the fact that he is learning their language - which is more a symbolic gesture than a real basis for conversation. Natives and strangers communicate only with the help of a translator who has a special function: she not only translates contents and meanings, but she adapts them to bridge cultural differences. The natives do not speak any other language, but they do not bother. The film does not avoid many stereotypes, either about the domestic image of Westerners or about the natives: the notable persons of the community are not sophisticated, but bigheaded towards the civilized supervisor, because they think he has not noticed their dirty work. The image of this European, in which we can recognize the former Austro-Hungarian colonist, is quite different from the image of the American, whose behavior is much more resolute. Preparing for President Clinton's visit, the Americans do not vary set phrases and politeness, but they have to avoid any risk of an attack. They do not desire verbal rapprochement, but require the language of communication: their native English. Their self-image is not that of a propagator of democracy and they do not pay attention to verbal declamations as their European counterparts do. America is represented by the Secret Service and the security guards, who give the locals no opportunities and do not like to be taken as fools. Their actions are resolute and they find the hidden weapons; nevertheless, the biggest shock for the Bosnian mayor is that not only a foreigner, but a woman takes the command. The American reviser is a good example of the frightening image of the female Westerner, who is shown nearly without femininity. She is the head of the security group and superior to the Bosnian police commander; she does not get tricked by the Balkan men (as a result, the macho commander loses all his power, in his function and as man); and she demonstrates that a physical disability (she has only one leg) does not automatically make her a victim. Even if we do not know under which circumstances she lost her leg (maybe also in a war), she serves as a Western counterpart to a male post-war Balkan mentality: she is active, not corrupt, realistic in her judgment of herself and of others, without self-pity, but acts more masculine than feminine. She forcefully seizes control from the local administration, which their representatives see as a painful loss of power and a sign of weakness of male identity because they suffer defeat from a foreigner and a woman. This film is indicative of reflecting stereotypical images of the local men and of the other.

The patterns of the film have the function of a mirror of stereotype images in both directions: the native's perception of Western strangers and the other way around. It would not be a real black comedy if there was no irony of one's self and of the other. The images of the foreigners point to the moral double standards of the natives, dreaming of stereotypes which symbolize America, like peace, private freedom, economic flourishing, but they do not really want to change anything in their lives. Instead of criticizing consumerism, the natives, without any reflection, imitate all Americans as the best in the world. In this process, they show their weaknesses, which are caricatured. The film also criticizes the Janus-faced relationship of the natives toward "their own foreigners", the returned refugees whom they accuse of betrayal and living comfortably in a foreign country of Central Europe; the "real patriots" embellish their views with a pathetic heroism full of lies. A separation into black and white is shown in the film as not real or true, so there is no

classification into bad and good, foreign and native people; in contrast, the film asks for more differentiation. At the end a critical, but also conciliatory view is presented: the strangers leave, because it is really getting dangerous; the young people will leave Bosnia as well, because they have no future there, and a real conciliation is possible. A beginning is made, but it is the result of an inner desire and can never be the result of requests from uninvolved persons or institutions.

The film *Armin* by Ognjen Sviličić (2007) illuminates a special aspect, which Pavičić, who noticed it also in the films *What is a Man Without A Moustache?* (Hrvoje Hribar, 2005) and *What Iva Recorded On October 21, 2003* by Tomislav Radić (2005), calls ironizing of the “subservient mentality and colonial idolatry of the West within the Croatian (and, in the case of *Armin*, Bosnian) culture.”<sup>5</sup> Armin comes with his father from Bosnia to Zagreb to take part in a film audition, full of hope that this will offer him a European film perspective. At first the German film crew is not interested, since the thirteen-year-old boy seems to be too old for the part, but when he has an epileptic attack as a result of his sufferings during the war, they change their minds. Their interest in him is motivated by the medial need for such exotic stories and sensations, not by caring for him, his lost generation or the general situation in post-Yugoslav countries. Armin, who experiences degradation being only an object for his superior and for the information-sated West, refuses the offer and returns to Bosnia.

The Croatian film *What Iva Recorded On October 21, 2003*, which won the Pula Festival award in the same year, deals with the topic of the foreigner differently from the films mentioned before. Using the *mise en abyme* (here: a film within a film), a level of reflection of the inner story line is given: for her 14th birthday Iva gets a video camera as a gift, and films everything around her that evening at her home and, later, in a restaurant. Her stepfather has invited his German partner, with whom he wants to make a profitable business deal. Through the camera lens, Iva notices the gradual unraveling of the characters and the collapse of her family. The German guest has the function of a catalyst: Iva’s stepfather is full of complexity and subservient in business, but at home he has the command; Iva’s mother is a perfectionist, and both like to drink. Everyone idolizes the German partner, who enjoys this and starts to flirt with Iva’s mother, which her husband notices without emotion. The German is a man without scruples: he knows that the family of the Croatian partner hopes to make a profitable contract with him and he exploits the situation; he wants Iva’s mother to come to his hotel, knowing that her husband will not have the courage to break the connections with him. Invited first to their home, then to the restaurant, he leaves the whole bill to the locals, and when the situation comes to a head, he leaves the restaurant and returns to the hotel. The contract he did not want to talk about was not signed. The image of the German in this film is no more negative than that of the other adults - Iva’s parents, her stepbrother, his girlfriend, an escort - but he is not shown with great sympathy. Besides the individual characteristics of the figures, a

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<sup>5</sup> Pavičić, Jurica. 2011. *Postjugoslavenski film. Stil i ideologija*. Zagreb: Hrvatski filmski savez, 105.



collective characteristic can be seen as well: the hospitality of the Croatian family on one hand, and meanness and utilitarianism on the other hand, while the German's flirtation is motivated by love of adventure and arrogance towards the Croatian partner, reinforced by alcohol.

Another perspective on strangers and foreign countries is depicted in films featuring remigrants and emigrants returning to the former homeland to visit. Here, aspects of nostalgia and cultural differences are predominant. The previously mentioned film *Fuse* (*Gori vatra*) shows very different people belonging to the first group. Two women have returned to Bosnia from Germany, where they spent the period of the war and shortly thereafter. They were driven by nostalgia and homesickness, but also by false information and expectations about the situation in Bosnia, received from both sides: from the Bosnians to embellish the post-war situation, and from the Germans to get rid of the refugees. They become disenchanted very quickly: the later girlfriend of Faruk, in her destroyed home, becomes a double amputee due to a hidden mine, and later she and Faruk decide to leave Bosnia, where there are no opportunities for them; the singer Hitka returns and decides to stay there, although she is slandered for betraying the Bosnians during the war. Their experience in Germany is not dealt with as a topic; even when the return is not a central theme of the film, the image of the ideal homeland is soberly deconstructed. The contrary position is found in films like *Made in Yugoslavia* by Miko Lazić (2005), which shows (without confirming many stereotypes about the self and the other) the relationship between immigrant workers, their old and their new homelands. Not the cultural and social contrast, but suffering and the nostalgia of Balkan and Mexican immigrants in America is the focus of the film *Someone Else's America* (*Tuđa Amerika*) by Goran Paskaljević (1995), a topic which will not be explored in depth here.

An overwhelming number of foreigners depicted are representatives of the West, but some also come from the East. People from the nearer countries of Eastern or Southeastern Europe often are not seen as outsiders, but as related Slavic people. Nevertheless, even in these cases one can find a kind of male contempt and arrogance towards the women from Eastern Europe, who are very often prostitutes (in *Fuse*, *Bal-Can-Can* etc.). In contrast, people from the Far East represent a culture radically alien to that of the Balkans. Due to this disparity they are used as characters to examine foreignness. The Croatian film *Sorry for Kung Fu* (*Oprosti za Kung fu*) by Ognjen Sviličić (2004) uses this big difference to show the damaging influence of ethnic prejudice in general. Mira returns to her home from Germany while pregnant, which is a shock for her family, especially for her father who is searching for a suitable husband for her: he has to be a Croat, Catholic, prominent, and if possible even clever. The shock gets bigger when the baby is born, because its father (who is never shown in the film) was an East Asian, as made evident by the child's physiognomy; because of his racial characteristics he has no part in the Croatian community. The foreigner himself is not an issue, but rather the local perceptions of the foreigner, showing them as racially prejudiced not only towards Asians, but foreigners in general. The film deals with the question of the relationship between the self and the other, and it illuminates the difficult process of familiarization with more tolerance. The fact that Asians in general are seen, from a racial standpoint, as less valuable people of a completely alien,

collectivistic culture, is shown in other films by the relationship of uncaring locals towards Asians (often depicted in human trafficking).<sup>6</sup> In the film *The Melon Route* (*Put lubenice*) by Branko Schmidt (2006), which won many awards, a group of Asian immigrants has to be ferried across the river Sava to Croatia to enter the European Union. They are people in a literal sense of transition, wares in the hands of slave traders. All of them perish by drowning, except one Chinese girl who survives. The former soldier and drug-addict Mirko, who takes care of her, rediscovers his sense of self, and his solidarity shows that they have more in common in their poor lives than people speaking the same language and sharing the same culture. Mirko and the Chinese girl are outsiders in the society, losers in categories of social and economic success - in contrast to the war profiteers who have dominated the recent political stage in the film. This is also the reason for the hatred of the local authorities, as they want to hide their own criminal activities, even by murder. Killing these war profiteers, Mirko (in a way reminiscent of the classic western film) not only saves the Chinese girl from her prosecutors, but also delivers the xenophobic society from warmongers and profiteers.

In summary, the West, which includes Europe and/or North America and which is incarnated in the UNPROFOR, managers, reporters, journalists and politicians in the films analyzed above, is in most cases shown in a negative light. The audience views the aforementioned foreigners who live temporarily in the post-Yugoslav country through the eyes of the natives, sometimes oversimplified. The filmic strangers are often shown very critically, in a different way to their own culture's contexts or as they want to be seen: they are passive and do not understand the real situation in the country where they have to work, solve problems and help. Because of this alienation, they do their work only in an undedicated manner, superficially, only to satisfy the targets and demands of their economic and political organizations. Most of them are naïve, easily beguiled and easily fooled: the others are calculating and cold - many are shown as caricatures in the films. The locals see them as representatives of the new colonialism of Western powers, sometimes with fear of repression; the Westerners often are shown as politically and ideologically arrogant, but ironically as mentally inferior, because they are no match for the Balkan people, who are tricky and clever. The presentation can therefore be seen as filmic revenge and payoff against the Westerner, but also as a critique of Western military profit. Journalists in particular use war disasters and human suffering as sensations and the exotic near-European normality. In general, Western foreigners are criticized about their lack of emotion towards the suffering people. The relationship between locals and Westerners in post-Yugoslav films is complicated and disturbed - at least in more native, post-colonial stereotypes than in positive ones, while the Asian prejudice is used for criticizing racist tendencies and fear of the other in recent nationalistic post-Balkan societies. The foreigner is used as a mirror of stereotype images in both directions. Thus these few films testify not only to a more critical position towards the image of foreigners and of the other, but also to the critical distance towards their own stereotypes of thinking - the self-victimization, the obstinacy in reproducing a black-and-white way of thinking, their own values

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<sup>6</sup> Velija (*Gori vatra*), for example, trades in cigarettes, alcohol, weapons, but also in people (in his hierarchy, the Asians are on the lowest level); he does not neglect any kind of profitable business.

of consumerism and the overcoming of nationalism, which had such fatal consequences for the history of the Balkans during recent decades. Nevertheless, they also witness the locals' pride: to refuse degradation and to develop a new consciousness.

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