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On Being Young, Muslim, and from the Balkans: Perspectives of Belonging in Belgium and Germany

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ABSTRACT

The disintegration of Yugoslavia ended with the mass migration of about four million people who found refuge in different European countries and overseas. As extensive literature on the Balkan diaspora primarily focused on their attachment to their former home and the fantasy of a return, interest and awareness about the descendants have remained at an early stage. By looking at two small communities of young Muslims born to former Yugoslavian Muslim families residing in Antwerp (Belgium) and Dortmund (Germany), this paper investigates whether such post-migrant generations remain exposed, if at all, to a condition of atopicality vis-à-vis the external ascription of migration and construction as migrants. Based on qualitative research methods, the findings permit us to discuss how feelings and practices of belonging and 'being Muslim' are still embedded in the family heritage, and heightened by 'migratism' and Islamophobia in Belgium and Germany.

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1. Introduction

The disintegration of Yugoslavia ended with the mass-migration of about 4 million people who found refuge in different European countries and overseas (UNHCR 2001–2023). Muslims from war-torn Yugoslavia were associated with the long-established Turkish diaspora (Mushaben 2008: 511) and seen through the imaginary lens of 'the Orient' (Bakic-Hayden 1995: 918). They were generally considered holders of an exceptional Islam (Rexhepi 2023: 51) and bearers of similar history of other former Yugoslavian (white) refugees and migrants (Hromadžic 2023; Colic-Peisker 2005, among others). This misrepresentation led scholars to focus on the 'migration turn' in post-socialist Europe (Melegh 2023), overlooking the much older global-local interactions with the *ummah* (Merdjanova 2013) – meaning, the global Muslim community.

Diaspora studies have been based on the attachment to the former home and, typically, on the fantasy of return (Hirsch and Miller 2011). Former Yugoslavian Muslims were considered a specific political entity to be repatriated and reintegrated in order to

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reverse the ethnic cleansing endured during the war (Black 2001). This other misrepresentation overlooked the impossibility of return due to the genocidal practices of erasure, uprooting and displacement embedded in the acts of war of the 1990s. Descendants of these Muslim families are even considered 'white Muslims' or 'born Muslims' (Amer and Howarth 2018: 614). Alternatively, they are ascribed and constructed as migrants in cultural and religious opposition to Christian Enlighted Europe (El-Tayeb 2008: 651) and, therefore, quintessentially different from Christian (white) Balkan populations. Moreover, the methodological difficulties of tracing generational changes within intimate spaces could not unravel the modes young Muslims with Balkan roots care and nurture a sense of belonging to their parental birthplace (Bougarel and Mihaylova 2005: 12; Bougarel 2008: 155; Lecoyer 2020: 151). Hence, interest and awareness about the operationalisation of national identity of the so-called 'second generations' remained at an early stage (Vathi 2015: 3) or resulted in studies of the process of migration and integration rather than on the emergence of native minorities (El-Tayeb 2011: xxi).

This research paper is a small step in this scholarly direction. The main goal of this study is twofold: first, it investigates how young Muslims born to former Yugoslavian Muslim families nurture their sense of belonging vis-à-vis their family migration heritage; second, it delves into the extent to which this post-migrant generation remains exposed, if at all, to a condition of *atopicality* (Marramao 2012: 70) vis-à-vis the *ascription* of migration and *construction* as migrants (Tudor 2018: 1058). It should be pointed out that this study is not about the politics of belonging *per se*, which is concerned with the boundaries of the political community of belonging and, in turn, with the boundaries that separate 'us' from 'them' (Yuval-Davis 2006). Nor does it focus on contestations of the participatory dimension of citizenship and the status or entitlements that such membership entails. Instead, it explores how young Muslims born outside the Balkans, stand inside or outside the imaginary boundary line of the nation and/or other communities of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2011: 3). This paper thus aims to shed light on how they hold, nurture or even deny their Muslimness vis-à-vis Europe's anti-Muslim racism that heightens a sense of belonging to their birthplace and/or the parental country of origin.

2. Theoretical Framework

The thorny question of 'what does it mean to be European' has been compounded by studies of 'belonging' and 'not-belonging ' – namely, by the recognition of 'who belongs to Europe' and the exclusion of those who do not. Since Europeans conceptualise national identities in terms of ethnic belonging, the latter has been used interchangeably with the concept of identity, and often associated with themes of citizenship and migration. Fatima El-Tayeb (2020: 76) points to Europe's colonial amnesia of the continent's past with regard to its post-colonial (and post-socialist, my emphasis) populations who continue to remain 'un-Europeans'. Giacomo Marramao here argues that there is a need for symbolic identification of belonging that can never find full realisation in the acquisition of citizenship – not even in its broadest imaginable or conceivable form (2012: 76). As Alyosxa Tudor suggests (2023), the study of the interplay between the (shifting) meaning of racialisation, whiteness and the hegemonic understanding of European-ness cannot but include the field of migration. The complex history of Eastern and Southeast Europe(an-ness) reveals how whiteness operates in relation to Europe's

dominant (and predominant) Christian core. As regards Islam, Europe's cultural reluctance to recognise the century-long presence of Muslims does not stem exclusively from a theological impulse and motive (Ramberg 2004: 5). Nor does it come exclusively from those rigid Euro-modern philosophies that silence other local and indigenous ontologies, knowledge and practices that 'do not fit' in the Western canon (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012). If anything, the prescription and proscription to think of Muslims from/in the Balkans as subjects defined and constituted by and in regulation, restriction and control (Karić et al. 2023) barely address Europe's long history of racialisation.

In the 1990s, the Yugoslav wars and the genocidal violence against local Muslims reactivated the intertwined questions of race and coloniality *from within* Europe (Bjelić 2018: 752). The war-torn region became the venue for raising yet again the aforementioned questions, albeit in a slightly different manner: 'what is Europe supposed to be?' rather than 'what is Europe?' Hence, 'who counts as European?' rather than 'who is European?' The demise of socialism accelerated the reconnection between the Muslims from/in the Balkans and the Muslim world, mainly the Middle East. This potential realignment began raising the question related to the idea of 'local Islam' in the Balkans and the *ummah* (Sadriu 2017: 541), causing alert among large circles of pundits and experts who never ceased to depict Islam as an invasive and threatening 'Trojan horse' within the white, Christian, Europe (Sofos and Tsagarousianou 2013: 15). When other scholars acknowledge the contribution of Islam and Muslims in/from the Balkans to Europe, such statements come off as banal and trite because sharply demarcating an understanding of the historical experiences of Muslims in the Balkans as categorically different – and, indeed, 'European ' – to that of Muslims in Europe's colonial empire (Karić et al. 2023). The Muslim diaspora is instead the favourite target of Otherization (Merdjanova 2013: 115) and its members assorted with any fellow Muslim originally from Turkey, Africa, the Middle East or Asia. This subtle mechanism of equalisation has not only come to contradict Europe's attempt to define a 'European Islam' and curtail it from 'the extremist, suspect and fundamentalist Islam' that must remain outside (Rexhepi 2017b: 53). It has also come to constitute a single Muslim minority in the face of European prejudice (Karić et al. 2023), preventing Muslims from and beyond the Balkans to become part of the tolerant and secular European 'we-ness' (El-Tayeb 2011: xxvi, Ramberg 2004: 6). This Eurocentric bent aggravates the continuous conflict and negotiation between non-European Muslims originally from the postcolonial world (Cesari 2003: 256) and those from the Balkans being already EU citizens.

Within the European Union, efforts to prevent inflows at unauthorised locations have targeted the land borders of Muslim-majority Balkan countries, which have entered and internalised the securitisation discourse over the Schengen zone (Preljević and Ljubović 2021: 264). Unlike other non-Muslim majority Balkan countries, Bosnia and Kosovo continue to experience a fragmentation of their national sovereignty (Karić et al. 2023). In both countries and Western Balkans in general, Piro Rexhepi argues that the EU enlargement project has so far wasted energy on the rhetoric that all people in [and from] the Balkans – including refugees, Roma and Muslims – are human too (2017b: 46). Although the latter groups are anchored in the 'western hemisphere' because different from those coming from further east and the Global south, their intra-Europe experiences and practices of migration equalise them with those incoming. Paraphrasing Aleksandar Hemon's words, Muslims from/in the Balkans are just close

enough to being Europe to keep perpetually failing at being Europe (Bronwyn 2020). As Avtar Brah would argue here (1996: 2), they struggle to see themselves as both – namely, Muslims and Europeans – because any identification between the latter and the pleas of the former would spark public outcry and intensify Islamophobia (Rexhepi 2015, 2017a: 55).

As regards post-migrant generations of Muslims with Balkan family heritage but born outside the region, belonging is heightened by a permanent condition of migrating in their birthplaces. Their 'homeland', 'host country' and even cosmopolitan references to belonging remain a project-in-the-making (Merdjanova 2013: 103). This condition of liminality holds them hostage to continuous and unpredictable displacement, exposing them to the recurrent questions regarding their loyalty to Europe and whether or not they can be considered a threat to liberal democracy. They are no longer Orientals nor fully Europeans since Westerners would unlikely accept them as equals (Tlostanova 2017; Mark et al. 2019: 282). To put it simply, they are still considered immigrants – in opposition to citizens – in the country in which they were born and currently reside (Dahinden 2016). They thus remain trapped in a status of colonised, discriminated and racialised non-European subjects (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012) – all ascriptions that impose a sort of 'civilisational illegitimacy' (Bougarel 2008: 160) over their already largely opinionated integration and acceptance (Merdjanova 2013: 104). In this regard, Tudor (2023) coined the term 'migratisation' to foreground the *ascription* of migration to certain bodies and the *construction* as migrants of certain people as 'at home'.

3. Research Method

3.1. In Search of (Lost) Belonging

This paper draws on the qualitative data and information collected from two small communities of young Muslims born in Balkan families residing in Belgium and Germany. Respectively, the first group is composed of $n = 13$ Muslims (8 males and 5 females) born and raised in Antwerp, whose parents fled Muslim-majority areas of northwest Bosnia during the 1990s. In the second group, $n = 11$ Muslims of Albanian origin (7 males, 4 females) were born and raised in former guest-worker families who arrived in Dortmund in the early 1980s from the multicultural town of Kičevo (herein, in Alb. Kërçovë) in North Macedonia.

Fieldwork was conducted between March and June 2023 and organised around in-depth interviews and participant-observation in the city districts of Deurne and Borgerhout in Antwerp, and Innenstadt-Nord in Dortmund to capture in depth and breadth the ways respondents nurture, reiterate and care about belonging vis-à-vis their family migration heritage. Belgium and Germany were chosen as exemplary places to investigate productively the intersection of power relations vis-à-vis different forms of discriminations in their typically mobile and post-migrant societies. The specific areas of Antwerp and Dortmund were chosen to investigate a sense of belonging to (post-)migrant residents and how they compromise a different set of interconnected relationships of mutuality and support, which, if necessary, emerges in moments of need or danger (Sofos and Tsagarousianou 2013: 96). It was assumed that a locally-nuanced connectedness with the neighbourhood would replicate a stunted and deformed sense of

identification with the core society and with what is despised and dreaded by most national stocks (Tsagarousianou 2016: 70).

Addressing the question of belonging carries the risk of whitening external ascription of migration to post-migrant generation, or reinforcing a whitened construction of European-ness, to use again Tudor's words (2018: 1058). As other scholars point out (Sadriu 2017; Ferizaj 2023; Rexhepi 2023, among others), such risk can shrink the space for Muslims from/in the Balkans to express their sense of belonging to the *ummah* and/or genuine agency. Against this pitfall, this study favours the description of 'young, Muslim, from the Balkans' rather than that of 'second-generation Balkan Muslims' or 'Balkan Muslims'. While the latter resembles a colonialist taxonomy and reinforces a signifier of non-belonging to the national community and lived citizenship (Riniolo and Toivanen 2023: 302), the former is employed to avoid mulling uncritically over the integration (or lack thereof) of 'secondos' and reinforcing the invisible divide between (white) Europeans and former migrant communities (of colour) that makes most Muslims feel not included in Europe (El-Tayeb 2011).

3.2. Positionality and Interviews

Qualitative data has been collected through in-depth interviews. Snowball method was facilitated by a previously established network of scholars and colleagues who played the role of gatekeepers. This emic perspective pre-empted unnecessary ethnicization from the outside (Millar 2018) and better showed expectations, sensitivities and concerns pertaining issues of belonging from the perspectives of respondents. An 'ethnographic sensibility' was also employed to avoid describing a collective in a context subjected to law (Simmons and Smith 2017) and providing a heavy-handed legal description of Islam (Karić et al. 2023).

Since both groups were born either in Germany or Belgium, therefore socialised with national cultures and languages, the personal bond with the parental countries of origin (may) gradually lose direct emotional meaning, or may also be mythologised and remain an element of family heritage (Bobako 2015: 46). Here, it was hypothesised that (post-)migration practices have not necessarily been the same with the post-Yugoslav diaspora. Thus, in-depth interviews were also held to investigate how they care about Bosnian and Albanian cultures, comply with family traditions, spend quality time at their parental birthplace, and worship Islam, or nurture a particularly alternative cosmopolitan attitude (Roy 2007: xi). Two open research questions (RQ) were raised to explore whether a sense of unfamiliarity with their birthplace or parental country of origin – be it Belgium or Germany, and North Macedonia or Bosnia, respectively – is hijacked by Europe's unwillingness to abide citizens of predominantly Muslim heritage.

> RQ1 – How do you grapple with the legacies of your family migration experiences and religious identity while living in a secular and multicultural society?
>
> RQ2 – If at all, when do you experience a sense of belonging to your place of residence and your parents' country of origin in your everyday life?

These two questions followed a semi-structured and theme-guided questionnaire comprised of other open questions aiming to intercept nuances and sensibilities of religious

and political identity. Prior to kick off the interview, a Participation Information Sheet (PIS) and an Interview Consent Form (ICF) were provided. While the latter was not signed out as a matter of trust, the former was always carefully read and discussed in detail. Each respondent was assured and made aware of the right to remain anonymous, withdraw at any time and receive the transcripts of the oral conversation a few days after the interview. The following sections refer to numerous illustrations pertaining everyday issues of belonging used to foreground the (shifting) meanings of racialisation, gendered, at times class, and hegemonic understanding of European-ness and intra-European migration from Belgium and Germany.

4. Results

4.1. Where are You really *From?*

As regards young Muslims with Albanian roots, the maintenance of transnational ties with North Macedonia is not uniform. The parents' burden of integration is salient and transmitted through a set of performative practices that do not prevent respondents from admitting that they enact different ways of belonging than older generations. Respondents particularly depend on parental goodwill or a wealth of transnational ways of being and belonging (Vathi 2015: 34). As families are not originally from Albania proper, the trans-local reproduction of Albanian customs and traditions replicates minority-majority dynamics across time and space. There is no doubt that the personal attachment to Albanian culture also differs from the construction and reproduction of the parental identity narratives (Yuval-Davis 2006: 203). Moreover, belonging largely depends on the socio-economic background that caused migration (and displacement), due to which experiences of integration (or lack thereof) in the host society have (not) occurred.

Younger respondents did not avoid categorisation or draw uncritical conclusions about their sense of unfamiliarity to the parental place of origin. If anything, they mostly confess to feeling somehow uprooted from North Macedonia and from their parents' experiences of migration. Long-lasting traumas of integration impinge on their feeling of being fully integrated in, and feeling attached to, Germany. Respondents do not reject Albanian culture and traditions intertwined or linked with Islam, but they are more likely than previous generations to nurture a 'strategic cosmopolitanism' to avoid identity dilemmas. They were found navigating between two (or more) cultures – German, Albanian, and pop-Islam (Gerlach 2006) – while juggling religious and secular ways of thinking, often crippled by self-doubt triggered by the 'halal-or-haram' question. Living in Germany and visiting North Macedonia activate a sense of attachment and remoteness to their 'big family [in Kërçovë]' and 'in [North] Macedonia [where] this double identity is difficult to deal with' especially during childhood.

A more symbolic sense of belonging seemingly shows a variety of tendencies and orientations amid highly complex 'global-to-local' interconnections and peculiar gender dynamics at the family level. Generally, it seems that Albanian culture is passed down across generations by traditionally remaining a man's world and only a matter of fathers and sons (Lowenthal 1998: 42). A female respondent bursts into tears while verbalising her malaise for 'being forbidden [by the father] to veil [herself] in order to better adapt to German society'. She critically added that this decision

stems simply from 'common, patriarchal, double standards inside Albanian families, having nothing to do with Islam'. Since she herself was born and raised in Dortmund, works in town and has her life established in Germany, this type of imposition intensifies her sense of not-belonging to the female Muslim community. Being unveiled also distances her from the rest of the veiled Muslim women and the traditional rules of Islam; simultaneously, her critical stances toward patriarchal roles increases distance with her family and, at times, the rest of the Albanian Muslim community. In retrospect, these commonly gendered dynamics show how Albanian Muslim masculinities are subordinate to European Christian or secular masculinities. In seeing her daughter veiled, the father's fear stems from having internalised Islamic practices as foreign to Germany where 'Personen mit Migrationshintergrund' (in Eng. people with a migration background) are generally treated as non-white Germans (Ferizaj 2023). Among males, instead, Islam reiterates the burden of belonging to a country, namely, North Macedonia, barely associated with the culturally developed Christian (white) Europe. Regardless of the level of religious salience, Islam is much less equalised with, and acknowledged as, Judaism and/or Christianity, while, second, rampant Islamophobia hits the nerves of the already-minoritised Albanian diaspora in their place of residence. A respondent recalls his real-life experiences, as follows:

> Once I confessed to a [German] friend to be Muslim. He was taken by surprise: 'You were born here, but your family is originally from Macedonia, Albanian and Muslim. Wait, where are you really from?'

This question couples with daily verbal assaults and racist expressions – all creating an echo chamber where young Muslims perceive Islamophobia in the political discourse and social media platforms. Respondents paradoxically self-reiterate the downward spirals of alienation and dominant explanations that have contributed to the multiple converging crises and pain that Muslims in the Balkans have endured over the last three decades (Rexhepi 2017a). A respondent summarises, 'I am Albanian, therefore more European than other Muslim friends of mine whose Islam has nothing to do with European culture'. As already introduced, Albanians yearn to present themselves as (white) Europeans to frame themselves as 'good European Muslims' opposed to 'bad Arab Muslims' (Sadriu 2017) while being burdened to belong to a Muslim-majority population from the periphery of Europe (Ferizaj 2023). Conversely, some female respondents enact postulates of solidarity with other female Muslims originally from Palestine, Kurdistan and Morocco. At the city level, Islam creates a sense of belonging to a transnational community in which interactions are shaped by common experiences of migration (El-Tayeb 2011: xxi). Although Islam remains in a binary, unified and separated position from 'Europe' (Bobako 2015: 44), interviewed female respondents attempt to soften the feeling of being unwanted, unwelcomed and sometimes hated. As much as unfair and unpleasant circumstances matter on the individual level, they realise that the all-encompassing discourse about Islam and Muslims is imprinted on their bodies (Özyürek 2015).

When respondents constantly reinstate 'that [they] do not drink [alcohol], eat pork, and bet' [after] 'working for years in the same place' in Innenstadt-Nord, this perspective is particularly relevant as Dortmund is Germany's most segregated city when considering indices of ethnic and social segregation (Sürig and Wilmes 2015: 102). Since the 1980s

Albanian families have clustered in this neighbourhood, along with other communities from the Balkans, Eastern Europe and the Global South. In it, respondents develop a pragmatic approach to different inner-city environments. Some easily negotiate cultural diversity from within Innenstadt-Nord, while others refer to this area as a much safer and more liveable space for young Muslims compared to Dorstfeld, defined by one respondent as a 'Nazi-Kiez ' – literally, a 'Nazi area'. In Innenstadt-Nord, quotidian encounters with other same-age peers sharing a similar family migration heritage boost a transnational circuit of friendships and provide a 'safety net' against potential exclusion and lack of social capital (Vathi 2015: 10). Although 'street cultures', often in contradiction with Islam, surround the community under study, the postmodern and secular culture of German society is pragmatically welcomed thanks to the transnational Muslim friendships that de-essentialise processes of belonging to kinship and ethnic family background. Only one male respondent refers to the neighbourhood as a 'ghetto', while the rest realise that intra-city dynamics and the political atmosphere may impinge on their 'being Muslims'. In their place of residence, which is often identified in the neighbourhood, Islam becomes a 'secondary' yet connected issue with street violence and radical Muslims that might constitute a potential risk. There is little doubt that the international context has a very powerful impact on local debates and national identity (Sadriu 2017: 542).

4.2. Do Belgium and Bosnia Mirror Each Other?

Some recent data on the Bosnian diaspora estimates that 8,000 former war refugees settled in Belgium since the early 1990s. About 1,800 arrived in Antwerp (Halilović 2008: 18) – making the Dutch city the 'centre of the Bosnian diaspora in Belgium', as the saying goes among Bosnians themselves residing in town. While conducting in-depth interviews, one joked about being 'proudly bigheaded ' – referring to a Flemish metaphor that depicts the feeling of superiority and greatness of Antwerpians. Another respondent states to 'have lived her entire life in Antwerp and cannot imagine her future far from it'. Yet another speaks of the importance of the multicultural district of Durne, the neighbourhood where most former Yugoslavian Muslims found refuge after fleeing the war in Bosnia.

This strong sense of belonging to the city of Antwerp takes on another poignancy. Many restate the right of their parents to enter Belgium as members of a political community escaping war, and, once inside, exert the right to become citizens of a pluralist society (Yuval-Davis 1991: 56). In so doing, respondents recall their 'semi-diasporic situation', thereby revealing to belong to 'a diaspora's diaspora' (Nelson 2011: 25) whose members are often treated as having just arrived, regardless of how long they have been in the country (El-Tayeb 2017). Nurturing a long-distance relations with Bosnia is particularly important (Bougarel 2008: 151) as they are fully aware of belonging to the generation born outside Bosnia because of the genocidal violence against Yugoslavian Muslims. In fact, most perceive their birthplace and Muslimness not so much as a by-product of the violence endured by their communities, but as the very purpose of persecuting Muslims in Yugoslavia. Due to linguistic and institutional situations, respondents also feel 'minoritised' or 'not at home' as do many other Dutch speakers and citizens in the Belgian Flanders (Stroschein 2003: 4).

In theory, such a sense of unfamiliarity inevitably makes the establishment of social ties with people from the core community more difficult (Lesschaeve and Glaurdić 2023: 8), especially in terms of the older generation's possibility (or illusion) of returning back home. The parents' national origin is a central, or even unique, marker of their identity (Riniolo and Toivanen 2023: 304). Yet this attachment to Bosnia jeopardises that to Antwerp, especially when respondents experience distress in grappling with the legacies of a postmodern and post-secular society. Although many worship and care about Islam by openly manifesting their religious salience in and beyond the Bosnian Muslim community, identity contestation happens when they compare themselves with the post-migrant conditions of other Muslims in Belgium.

When respondents relate with Bosnia, the discourse on sameness and otherness changes, at least on the surface (Grünenberg 2005). Although they do not lack socialisation in their places of residence, they emphasise with bitterness the spatio-temporal contexts and dynamics of their parental experiences and critically reflect on the historical and political disputes in their place of birth and residence. In other words, respondents easily associate themselves with Belgium and Antwerp in particular. But again, they also recollect the events that led to their families fleeing Bosnia and settling in Belgium by wondering whether the anti-Muslim vernacularism can jeopardise their positions as Muslims living in Antwerp in the same way it did to their parents before the outbreak of war in Yugoslavia. Another spontaneous equalisation was verbalised between the migration experience of their parents and that of non-European newcomers. In this respect, primarily male respondents self-reiterate political speculation about the domestic problems caused by migration into Belgium, and other nationals 'really in need'. In their opinion, immigration raises problems in different fields of life (Preljević and Ljubović 2021) as newcomers exploit social benefits through tax exemption, education services, among others, and consequently affecting the already-established former migration communities. Here, as Piro Rexhepi notes (2017b: 55), Muslims in/from the Balkans reflect on the abuse of European hospitality, considering themselves the good, white, European Muslims when encountering racism among colleagues, friends and same-age peers who do not know about their religious faith. While conducting in-depth interviews, two male respondents (perhaps unconsciously) self-reiterate certain anti-migration discursive strategies in explaining how they handle the unfair pressure and endure the pain of their parents' dislocation from Bosnia. A female respondent, instead, reflects on how Bosnian Muslim war refugees were initially welcomed and rescued, but recently populism and nativism have dangerously shifted gears throughout the Flanders and targeted them simply because they are Muslims. These phenomena resemble those that she heard at home from her family's stories during Yugoslavia.

Some interview insights warn about a tense political atmosphere across Belgium, in which 'people easily get social benefits and exploit [Belgium's] "socialistic" society [while] sometimes sharing anti-Belgian sentiment'. Political tensions also reactivate the plight of the traumatic war experiences that can only further inflame rampant polarisation. A female respondent reminds her mother's words about

> Muslims being the majority before the war [in northwest Bosnia, but then] three concentration camps were set up. [She did not mean] that Belgium is like Bosnia [but Islamophobia] is very felt, [and] what is unthinkable to many, it is instead understood as possible by us.

Others admitted to navigating in uncertainty as they are seen, and continue to see themselves, as the 'eternal newcomers' in their birthplace, divided by a longitudinal fracture in terms of a double injunction of a conflictive co-existence and/or cohabitation with Bosnia. They daily detect a 'nano-racism', to use Achille Mbembe's words (2019: 57), that is, a series of everyday gestures that express the spiteful banter, some allusion or insinuation, a slip of the tongue, a joke, some consciously spiteful remarks that deliberately stigmatise and inflict violence to those who are not considered 'one of us'. To cope with this, they keep a sort of 'security distance' from some communities of the *ummah* in Antwerp, mainly composed of refugees and unloved newcomers who are perceived as different and dangerous to be accepted as European Muslims.

Tellingly, none reflected on the fact that their parents' birthplace in Northern Bosnia has yet again become a site for refugees and an EU-sponsored space for establishing refugee camps before entering the European Union (Rexhepi 2023: 22). In their opinion, their self-described 'light skin', European outfits and fluency in Dutch language constitute the concrete difference between them and other coreligionists. According to most respondents, 'whiteness' is the main reason for which they easily avoid unpleasant encounters and subtle forms of discrimination. However, their investment in whiteness comes close to Albanians' (Ferizaj 2023) as mentioned above. To affirm their 'European' identity, respondents seek unambiguous acknowledgment as white in its socio-political meaning in the attempt to normalise the history of 'Bosnian Islam' into the European canon. In turn, these claims to whiteness reveal how the effects of racialisation and the ideology of colour-blindness operate through an active process of suppression of Muslim solidarity across the *ummah* rather than a simple passive attitude of Islam in general (El-Tayeb 2011: xxiv). Nonetheless, in the multicultural neighbourhoods under observation, religious and cultural affinities particularly resonate cultural closeness with the Turkish diaspora. Türkiye is not seen as a 'second homeland' as for the second and third generation of Turkish families. However, respondents express a sense of attachment to Türkiye and same-age peers from Turkish Muslim families rather than other Muslims from Morocco or the Middle East. At the intercultural *iftar* event at the AntwerpExpo in April 2023, a respondent says that '*not every Bosnian feels comfortable to come here as most people prefer going to our mosque and attending community events there*'. The burden of the traumatic experiences of loss and discrimination still haunt the community, leading most Bosnian Muslims to prefer a familial environment to comply with practices of Islam. In this regard, there is little doubt that war legacies circulate across generations, thereby driving certain in-group dynamics and still having a grip on people's social networks (Lesschaeve and Glaurdić 2023).

5. Discussion

In Antwerp and Dortmund, intra-city dynamics show political dynamics of inclusion/exclusion and, in turn, shed light on meanings of belonging (Open Society Foundations 2011). Qualitative data shows that integration and acculturation has been more successful for post-migrant generations than for their older community members. Yet a general view persists that post-migrant generations' sense of belonging depends on the different geographies of the diaspora and the causes of migration (or forced displacement). Both impact on the different and pragmatic ways respondents negotiate their Muslimness in

both the private and public sphere; here Islam is largely embedded in the 'ethnic' and 'local' dynamics of the Slavic – and Albanian-speaking Muslim communities. Nonetheless, respondents verbalised a certain melancholia of non-belonging, which emerged as a sense of loss toward a place that cannot be recovered (Tudor and Rexhepi 2021: 198). As introduced, above, belonging cannot be solely resolved in the democratic idea of citizenship (Marramao 2012: 76) as most Northwest European countries – and Germany in particular – remain hostile to newcomers seeking to acquire citizenship and even those who already hold it.

The comparative approach to Antwerp and Dortmund turns out to be instructive for deconstructing processes of post-colonial Europe and its racialized premises with regard to the process of 'migratism'. In this regard, Tudor's distinction between the asymmetrical but complicated interdependent relationship of 'migratism' and racism (2023: 231) helps us understand the interview insights presented above. When respondents encountered everyday racism, they grappled with the ascriptions of 'migratism' that jeopardised their sense of belonging to any place they feel attached to – be it the national community, the *ummah* or the Balkan country their family came from. In El-Tayeb's words (2011: xiv), they continue to be the *European Others* in spite of having never been migrants themselves but actual citizens. For most respondents, indeed, the more distant their parents' mo(ve)ment of settling is, the stronger their feeling of 'not-belonging' to both North Macedonia and Germany, as well as Bosnia and Belgium, is. In retrospect, the wide range of personal choices undertaken to navigate between family values and customs, regimes of (double) citizenship and religious salience, did not simply show their quotidian attempts to nurture a sense of belonging. Drawing on a scholarly conversation between Tudor and Rexhepi (2021), respondents were more likely found juggling (unconsciously) with the reverberations and repercussions of Europe's long-lasting post-colonial legacies of racialisation and operational whiteness.

I here juxtapose Tudor's interconnection of class + race + migration + gender (2018: 1062) with my description of both groups of respondents as 'young + Muslim + (from the)Balkans'. In doing so, I better elucidate a sense of belonging (or lack thereof) among respondents according to the qualitative data collected for this study. The first tandem of class + young explains why respondents reiterate Islamophobia while discussing the geopolitical imaginaries that govern their racialized predicament and capitalism's hierarchies. Complaints and frustration over the 'spoilers' of welfare policies in Belgium or 'Muslims' anti-Belgian sentiment', among others, reveal the respondents' fear of being ascribed as newcomers and disposed by their arrival after their parents' painstaking integration. As German and Belgian citizens, anti-migration discourse was more likely verbalised to secure themselves in the dominant gaze rather than seeking a nationality as a most defining feature of their belonging. Most female respondents are less likely found verbalising such distress but instead overpowered by post-socialist racial hierarchies of capitalism. Against this backdrop, their pragmatic choices to nurture a sense of belonging to Belgium and Germany do not leave Albanian and Bosnian culture and language behind, including Islam.

When identifying themselves as 'Albanians, therefore European Muslims', the tandem of 'race + Muslim' provides perspectives as to why such rhetorical tactics were at times employed. Similar to older generations of Muslims from the Balkans

(Colic-Peisker 2005: 625; Maloku 2024, among others), post-migrant male respondents delegitimise dissenting (non-white) Muslims to prove themselves worthy of fitting into the European canon. As described in the previous sections, respondents attempted to 'educate' me – an obviously white Western European researcher – on their Europeanness. They recalled history, culture and kinship in order to associate 'their Islam' with Europe and liberal democracy, and detach the latter from 'other Islams' preached by non-European Muslims. Yet again, they attempted to undo the ascription of migratism labelling *all* Muslims as oriental, radical and backward people from Africa, the Middle East and the Far East. In fact, respondents' internalised Islamophobia was reiterated according to a hegemonic understanding of whiteness and Christianity as the norm (Ferizaj 2023).

Although it is no longer possible to distinguish between 'imported' and 'local' versions of Islam (Bardos 2014: 78), the tandem 'migration + Balkans' helps us understand how the diverse urban fabric of Antwerp and Dortmund facilitates respondents to hold and nurture a sense of belonging to family traditions, religious salience and their parental birthplace. At the intra-city level, whiteness shapes socio-political and cultural dynamics of belonging to the birthplaces of respondents (Antwerp/Dortmund) and that of their grand/parents (Bosnia/North Macedonia). Most young Muslims of Bosnian origin *white-pass* racialisation and minoritisation unlike same-age veiled Muslims from their own community and those with Turkish or Moroccan family heritage (Yuval-Davis 2011: 7). Conversely, veiled female respondents are hit the hardest by the deeply gendered nature of Islamophobia. In Dortmund's Innenstadt-Nord, the durability of 'migratisation' was more likely noticed than Antwerp's Deurne and Borgerhout among post-migrant generations of Muslims. Female respondents negotiate more carefully Muslimness in order to acknowledge diversity and avoid unpleasant encounters. Lastly, the lens of 'migration + Balkans' reveals the decades-long legacy of racialisation that Muslims in/from the Balkans have been subjected to, and how dynamics of urban marginalisation *re(b)order* Muslims' everyday life outside intricately and historically curtailed white spaces, to use Rexhepi's words here (2023: 8), around which whiteness and coloniality function transnationally.

To conclude, the tandem gender + Balkans deserves to be addressed as education and professional fields remain heavily policed in gendered, racialized and migratised promises in both Antwerp and Dortmund. Unlike what Rexhepi argues (2023: 32), female respondents tend to establish actions and practices of solidarity rather than reinforcing binary and exclusionary white/Queer/Islam divisions that prevent the emergence of intersectional solidarities and subjectivities. As Tudor suggests (2018), 'migratisation' can be useful for feminist theory and activism: in fact, male respondents were found to be outspoken about male coreligionists beyond their 'ethnic community', while females more easily analysed their own culture as a subtle means to reinforce family-based (Bosnian) and male-oriented (Albanian) values under the guise of Islam. In an attempt to overcome this predicament, a sense of belonging stretches beyond their female community members. Everyday acts of solidarity among Muslim women help to lessen the effects of limited university employment and traineeship opportunities resulting from factors such as 'exotic surnames', non-Western dress and the socio-economic family background.

6. Limitations and Further Research

Needless to say, this qualitative study would warrant further research to provide a more exhaustive representation of all untapped and inconspicuous practices and feelings of belonging. Further qualitative and quantitative research approach could surely better detect the shifting meaning of belonging to Northwest and Southeast Europe among post-socialist and post-war generation. However, the combination of participation-observation and in-depth interviews provides some telling insights. Among others, what has been discussed above can be better visualised through Alekander Hemon's idea of 'concentric motherlands' (2019: 41). Among the two groups of respondents, attachment to the Balkans is activated in the first familial and private circle of belonging. In it, Islamic practices and values are passed down generations, and later acted out in the urban place where the family and other Muslim groups have settled. Bosnia and North Macedonia remain somewhat unavailable, except for the parental birthplaces that the respondents visit often. These localities open the second circle of identity and belonging. After Yugoslavia fell apart and its would-be successor states were wounded and divided by war, the legacies of migration and displacement continue to burden young Muslims with Balkan roots yet born abroad. They know that family heritage and Islam are precious for their parents who endured exploitation and violence, but not equally important for their generation born afterward. As time passes by, they perceive that their connections with the Balkans (may) fade away, while Islam continues to link the latter along with the endless (hi)story circles of nationalism and hatred. In this last circle, both groups under study reckon the desire to belong to the Balkans as unassailable. A constellation of memories, music, storytelling and religious practices linger their generation over the family/community. Yet here the paradox unfolds: almost all respondents position themselves in between their birthplace and residence and that of their parents; hence, both places are interconnected and interdependent, but at the same time equally distant from one another, and thereby never fully graspable. However, both whiteness and 'migratism' contribute to such a paradox by shaping interconnections and interdependencies of belonging across time and space. Both phenomena operate through post-migrant generations and generational changes by stretching and constraining the boundaries of belonging. In other words, they de facto continue to include/exclude citizens into/from a personal or collective space of belonging.

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