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Muslims arrived in today’s Dagestan shortly after the death of the Prophet and in Lithuania before its inhabitants were Christianized. However, the whereabouts of the substantial and extremely heterogenous Muslim populations in Eastern Europe have often been treated as peripheral anomalies in Islamic studies. The book Muslims in Eastern Europe by Egdūnas Račius is an attempt to give an overview of the historical and contemporary trends in twenty-one Eastern European countries, in Russia, central Europe, the Balkans, the Baltic states and the post-Soviet successor states in Central Asia. Since such overview literature is almost non-existing, this initiative is welcome.

The opening chapter (“Autochthonous Islam of Eastern Europe – populations, practices and institutions”) describes the aspects emphasised throughout the book: statistics, practices, authorities, and institutions. Račius proposes to place the different types of Islam on a “spectrum” ranging from three “classical” forms: “Legalism” (Ḥanafism and Shāfiʿism), “Mysticism” (Naqshbandiyya, Qādiriyya, Bektāshiyya, Shādhiliyya), and “Folk Islam” (“different local practices”) to three “revivalist” forms including “(neo)-fundamentalism (Salafism, Tablīghī Jamāʿat), “Islamism (Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb ut-Tahrir), “post-Islamism and neo-traditionalism” (“individuals, various informal groups and NGOs”, and “jihadism” (Al-Qāʿida and the Islamic State) (16). Of these, he mostly uses “normative”, “legalistic,” “mystical” and “folk” Islam.

Chapter 2, “Historical overview” describes the different Islamic waves of expansion into Europe and the subsequent development of local Muslim communities in various political contexts: the Mongol-Tatar invasion of Eastern Europe and its consequences, and in the Russian and Ottoman possessions in East and South-Eastern Europe. The middle section covers four identified country clusters: “North-eastern Europe” (chapter 3) includes the Soviet Socialist Republics, Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States, Belarus and Moldova, and the following, “Successor states of Yugoslavia” (chapter 4) starts with the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and its legacy, and the successor states Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and

Keywords: Islam, Muslims, Eastern Europe, Balkans
Serbia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Slovenia and Croatia. While these (now) seven countries geographically belong to “South-Eastern Europe”, chapter 5 has this title, but includes only Albania, Bulgaria and Romania. The country cluster often referred to as the “Visegrad group”, i.e. Poland, Hungary, The Czech Republic and Slovakia, are the focus of chapter 6, “Central Europe.”

Chapter 7 is called “Islam in Eastern Europe, Eastern European Islam: new faces, the new challenges” and discusses factors like foreign actors, assimilation, migration, converts and radicalisation, and chapter 8 (“Considering the other side”) thematises more recent populist developments and “Muslimophobia.” In addition, nine tables outline demographic figures, refugee quotas, Eastern European Muslims in England and Wales, estimated numbers of converts, and prayer facilities. Four maps show the confessional distribution in Eastern Europe today, of the Golden Horde successor states, the ethno-confessional composition of the Caucasus and one of ethnicities in Yugoslavia and Albania, while fact boxes are dedicated to Bektashism, Salafism, the “Nazi intermezzo” and the Chechnya case. There is also a glossary of basic Islamic terms.

Writing such a book ideally requires reading skills in an unsurmountable number of languages. Račius’ field of expertise is Islam in Lithuania, and he relies primarily on English and Russian sources. This enables him to describe the institutional developments and various forms of Islamic authority in the countries historically under Russian and Soviet influence quite well. In contrast, the parts on the former Ottoman possessions in South-East Europe are marred by inaccuracies and factual errors, when it comes to terminology, analysis and the use of sources. Most of all the presentation of historical events is questionable. Račius laments the “dire lack of scholarly tradition” (xi) in this field, a claim which is only partially correct, and that makes it all the more surprising that he, according to the bibliography, neglects highly relevant studies even in English for example by the historian Noel Malcolm and the anthropologist Ger Duijzings. Accordingly, chapters 4 and 5 reveal serious knowledge gaps. The chapter on Yugoslavia starts with the claim that the Muslim population belonged to “two distinct ethnic groups – Serbo-Croatian and Albanian speakers” with different “ethno-confessional cultures” (78). This is completely wrong. “Serbo-Croat” was the official language in socialist Yugoslavia, founded as an attempt to stop the ethnic conflicts between Serbs and Croats. Since the Great Schism in 1054 these communities had developed separate confessional and ethnic cultures, which almost by definition excluded each other as well as Muslims. Moreover, it would be more
Another problem is the use of terms like “heterodox” (11, 157), “superstitious” (12), “unhealthy” (107) and “harmful” (103) orientations, which hint at normativity and essentialism, or formulations like “luring locals into conversion” (2). The use of “fundamentalism” is anachronistic, and it is unclear why “the Islamist approach may be called ‘top-down’” in this context (13). The analytical model (legalist, normative, folk, mystical, etc.) sheds little light on Islamic complexities in the Balkan context. Terms like “folk” and “mystical” (Sufi) often refer to phenomena that are intertwined or identical on the ground and creates false contradictions or anachronisms. There are far more Sufi traditions in the Balkans than those listed, and reduction of Sufi to “mystical” Islam and the emphasis on Sufi “heterodoxy” are misleading given the many un-mystical aspects of Sufism in different contexts (for example military, ethnic, socio-political, “folk,” “legalistic” or “normative”). In the early Ottoman period, Halveti networks were for example reinforcers of imperial Islam and orthopraxy. A lot of sentences probably create more confusion then clarity, for example references to “Salafi-legalist Islam tension and rivalry” (92) or Sufism’s “very pronounced dimension of non-legalist Islam” (8). On almost every page there are misunderstandings and unlikely interpretations, which seem related to insufficient contextual knowledge.

In an introductory book, one has to cut back on details, but popular pilgrimage sites like Ajvatovica in Bosnia, one of the largest Muslim gatherings in Europe and an interesting site to analyse changing identity formations, should be mentioned. So should Srebrenica and the annual memorials for the around 8000 Muslim men and boys killed by Serbian forces in 1995. This massacre is the worst war crime in Europe after World War II, but is not mentioned in the book, not even in the chapter on Bosnia. Such omissions are typical of the chapters on South-East Europe, and the reader is left with a highly asymmetric presentation of the security situation. The de-ottomanisation processes in the territories where new Christian-dominated nation states took control from the 19th century and onwards often meant de-islamisation and a heinous treatment of Muslims, such as forced assimilation, conversions and expulsion, ethnic cleansing and massacres, in many of the countries in the region, including in Greece.

To convey this part of the story is pivotal to understand Islam and Muslims in South-Eastern Europe, but Račius just hints at such atrocious
events and processes. A typical example is this: Belgrade was “full of Islamic architecture and Muslim inhabitants, with close to 100 mosques in the heyday of the Ottoman period in the seventeenth century. Today Belgrade has only one surviving historical mosque” (93). What happened, remains between the lines. In the same vein, with the annexation of Kosovo and Macedonia in 1912–1913, we only learn that “Serbia became the possessor of sizeable Albanian Muslim communities”, not that the Serbian army massacred many of them. And when Račius acknowledges that “some sixty mosques were reportedly attacked in the brief period of armed hostilities” in Macedonia in 2001, he puts it in brackets, as a detail. In comparison, a full paragraph describes administrative issues concerning the building of a mosque for 200 Kaunas Tatars in Lithuania (68).

The ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims 1992–1995 is relegated to a subordinate clause when the war is described as one which “significantly altered the demographic balance and distribution of the country’s constituent ethnic groups. In certain areas (foremost in the eastern part of the country bordering Serbia, which after the war became a separate entity, “the Republic of Serbs”—RS), due to the ethnic cleansing of genocidal proportions, forced evictions and other means of intimidation, the share of Muslim population in RS was reduced to a negligible level (according to the 2013 census, the Muslim population in RS was only 14 per cent)” (86). Such vague, passive formulations permeate chapters 4 and 5 and make it hard for readers without previous knowledge to understand the course of events. Extreme cases of “Muslimophobia” have, however, been a recurrent part of social engineering projects in the Balkans, with an enormous impact on Muslim lives, identities, ideas, ideals, affiliations, discourse, practices, voting patterns, and demography. The forced population exchange between Greece and Turkey in 1923, which arguably set the standard for how Balkan states have dealt with border and minority issues, should also have been mentioned even though Greece is not included in the book. Račius, conversely, discusses Muslimophobia in relation to recent populism. Besides, the claims that the environment for Muslims was especially hostile during the Communist period is too generalizing.

To summarize: When it comes to Islam in South-Eastern Europe, the author does not fulfil his promise to provide the reader “with a picture of the general trends common to the Muslim communities of Eastern Europe” (xiii), and chapters 4 and 5, and parts of 2 should be thoroughly revised or removed before EUP considers publishing a second edition. As opposed to this, other sections of the book are quite useful.