From a long-term perspective, the most recent developments in the Balkans rather give the impression of the destruction of diversity and are usually read as a revival of violent ethno-nationalism. Apart from the dramatic case of Former Yugoslavia, one can indeed easily trace the evolution of ethno-nationalist genealogies in Albania, Greece, Bulgaria and Romania in the late/post-imperial context up to the present day.

Nevertheless, the hegemonic representation of Balkan states – by media, politicians and ‘experts’ in and outside of the Balkans – can be characterized as quite simplistic. Aside from, for example, economic decline, crime and corruption or ‘masses’ of potential immigrants, the ethno-nationalist implosion of the Balkans eroded by ‘ancient hatreds’, Islamophobia and genocide is also the subject of endless accounts. The ‘positive’ accounts have been equally Balkanist and teleological: prosperity due to free markets and privatization, citizens embracing and ‘learning democracy’ or brave activists fighting ethno-nationalism as the main social ‘evil’.

Without denying the salience of ethno-nationalist mobilization, and by no means disrespecting those who tragically lost their lives and homes – is that all there is? Is the predominant way of dealing with difference in the Balkans to vote for (ultra)-nationalists, discriminate against and securitize minorities, marginalize, expel and kill people because of the ‘other’ they are thought to embody? Are citizens of the Balkans led foremost by ethno-national sentiments as opposed to a ‘democratic’ consciousness of diversity ‘naturally’ embodied in a European future?

By drawing on anthropological and transdisciplinary ‘destabilizations’ of this ethnocentric and neoliberal gaze on the Balkans on the one hand, and fieldwork conducted in various parts of the region on the other, in this chapter I aim at a simultaneously exploratory and systematizing engagement with the issue of diversity in the Balkans. Thereby my line of thought follows a dialectic movement between two theoretical–empirical perspectives, both of which I regard as indispensable and interwoven.

The first takes seriously the tenacity of ethno-nationalism as one of the dominant dimensions of conceptualizing diversity in the Balkans. Inseparable from the first, the second perspective engages with looking ‘beyond’ ethno-nationalism (Verdery 1994) by in fact seeing ‘straight through’ it – ‘diversifying’ simplified readings of the Balkans by exploring its interdependence with and occlusion of other dimensions of social differentiation (such as the urbanity–rurality, economy, kinship, mobility, citizenship or gender) and their intersections throughout history.
Thus, this chapter aims to contribute to an exhaustive and stimulating perspective on the manifold ways difference was and is conceived, represented and lived in the south-eastern parts of Europe.

**Tracing legacies of diversity in the Balkans**

Even a very brief account focusing ‘merely’ on the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and socialist legacies in the Balkans reveals the stunning multidimensionality of diversity later infused by the ideology and political reality of the nation-state.

Although it can be argued that the Ottoman institution of the ‘millet’ may have provided a sound basis for a later articulation of nationalism, first and foremost its function was to regulate diversity along confessional lines beyond the realm of the state (see Lafi, this volume). Precisely those two dimensions – religion (being a Muslim or not) and the state (being a state-governing ‘professional Ottoman’ or not), and not ethno-national affiliation – were the main axes of differentiation in the Ottoman Empire (Sugar 1996 [1977]: 31f.), which had started incorporating the Balkans by the end of the fourteenth century. Apart from this core structure – clearly privileging Muslims and state-officials as opposed to non-Muslims and the ‘flock’ (reaya) – there existed an everyday realm comprising a huge number of other dimensions of differentiation. Namely, diversity in the Ottoman context was also crucially structured, for example, according to language (language was more associated with social class than with ‘nation’, multilingualism was very common and intersected with mobility, etc.); the socio-spatial-migration dimension (e.g. the specificities of urban–rural dynamics, borderlands, the vanishing ‘Muslim’ character of cities); or the intersection of social class and profession (beyond religious affiliation, individuals were ‘grouped’ and interacted according to their profession as, e.g., peasants, military land-administrators or urban craftspeople).

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the Ottoman legacy is the simultaneity of the order-obsession on the one hand and a pronounced flexibility on the other. Namely, a complex system of titles and functions ‘co-existed’ with processes of flexible ‘negotiation’ of identity and belonging. Apart from the millet system itself being marked by pronounced processuality, boundary management and internal diversity (see Barkey 2008), the dynamics of Ottoman frontiers is a prime example of how a highly regulated diversity regime (Grillo 2010) was very compatible with flexibility. Namely, the frontier legacy, or ‘frontier code’ (Sugar 1996 [1977]), of continuous mobility, conversion, religious tolerance, ‘flexible loyalties’ and nationalism-unsettling ambiguity (e.g. Bartov and Weitz 2013) has had a profound effect on local diversity patterns up to the present day (see Tošić forthcoming b).

The Habsburg/Austro-Hungarian way of accommodating difference was marked by a hierarchization based on the, essentially non-border-challenging, notion of ‘historical rights’ (e.g. Brubaker 2006). Accordingly, ‘historical nations’ (Germans, Italians, Poles and Hungarians) were distinguished from ‘people without history’ (such as the Slovaks, Ruthenians or Serbs), who were thought of as lacking ruling power, a nobility and a bourgeoisie. However, facing revolt framed in the language of national liberation, the empire reacted with flexibility. The new dual monarchy (1867) embodied a legally anchored equality of nationalities and state-approved multilingualism in schools and administration. Following Ernest Gellner, the responsiveness to circumstances led an – essentially absolutist – entity to become ‘a patron of a pluralistic and tolerant society’ (Gellner 1998: 12).

Accommodating religious diversity in the Balkans – with the focus on Islam in particular – was one of the prime concerns of the monarchy’s diversity regime. While appropriating Ottoman religious tolerance and even stimulating the emergence of a tri-confessional Bosnian nation,
Austro-Hungarian colonial involvement in Bosnia featured a specific and enduring central European ‘frontier orientalist’ (Gingrich 1998) grammar of incorporating Islam based on the dual register of the ‘civilizable’, hence ‘good’, Bosnian Muslim, as opposed to the ‘Turk’, who represented the eternally different and ‘bad’ Muslim.

The late imperial emergence of nationalism – eventually resulting in the dissolution of the empires into nation-states accompanied by the process of the ‘unmixing’ of peoples (e.g. Brubaker 1996) – gave rise to the post World War I international regime of maintaining peace and regulating diversity according to the notion of minority rights. However, due to its final collapse marked by World War II, the minority rights regime was replaced by the liberal-individualistic idiom of human rights (Brubaker 2006; Falk 2000), which was strongly opposed by the project of socialist modernity itself stressing collective rights and national self-determination.

The extensive early Marxist engagement with the late imperial politics of national liberation (e.g. Hobsbawm 1987) – including the hierarchical differentiation between ‘nations’ and ‘nationalities’ – had a strong impact on the Soviet and subsequently the Yugoslav diversity regime of hierarchical and institutionalized multinationality (Bringa 1995, Brubaker 1996). In spite of socialism’s ambivalence – simultaneously ‘enshrining’ nationality on the one hand and ‘folklorizing’ and persecuting it on the other – precisely the ethno-national represented the main, if not the only, ‘legitimate’ difference as long as it did not become political. In spite of evoking the Marxist dictum of ‘self-realization’, the social practices of real-socialism actually produced uniformity rather than diversity.1 All-pervading and ‘difference-flattening’ regimes of expropriation, surveillance and social engineering (Verdery 2011) ‘cleansed’ individual life of, for example, kinship, gender, religious or class difference by means of an ideological language reform (ibid.) and idealized ‘normal’ biographies (Niedermüller 2004). Staying securely put in a workplace and enthusiastically participating in the collective modernity project were supposed to make up the main elements of one’s identity and sociality. Still, social engineering and the economy of shortage (Verdery 2001) produced new differentiations, inequalities and interest groups – some of whom easily ‘picked up’ the readily available ethno-national card in pursuing their economic and political goals (Verdery 1994).

Although representing merely one variation of the socialist implosion in the Balkans, the Yugoslav ‘Balkan Tragedy’ served as an excellent basis for Balkanist media and ‘bestseller’ accounts (Bougarel et al. 2007) of the ‘outburst’ of ancient ethno-national hatred thereby occluding the complexity and multidimensionality of social differentiation in this part of Europe.

Finally the ongoing process of EU integration – often featuring a normative rather than a grass-roots multidimensional discourse on diversity around the notion of anti-discrimination (Blagojević 2011) – blends in well with the latest international ‘re-institution’ of the minority regime (Brubaker 2006) framed primarily in one-dimensional, that is, ethno-national, terms. Moreover, the dominant neoliberal idiom of rights (Falk 2000) enhances not only primarily civil and political rights, but also the implicit view that one should frame difference along one dimension at a time, rather than encouraging potentially ‘solidary’ intersectional imaginaries of (super)-diversity (Vertovec 2007) that imply that everyone simultaneously embodies different dimensions of difference.

‘Unpacking’ diversity in the Balkans ‘straight through’ the ethno-national

The challenge of viewing the Balkans ‘beyond’ ‘parochial ethno-national terms’ (Blumi 2011: 2) and ‘ethnic bias’ (Bougarel et al. 2007) can be met by taking a nuanced look ‘straight through’ the ethno-national – simultaneously allowing for its salience as well as its historical complexity and
conditionality, and finally exposing the occlusion of other fundamental aspects of social differentiation (Verdery 1994).

In spite of the fact that the nationalist option was and still is simply a deliberate choice by a substantial fragment of the Balkan population (Hayden 2007), violent ethno-nationalism is neither an irrational Balkan ‘trait’ nor a mere ‘Western’ representational distortion of the peaceful Balkan cultural ‘mosaic’. Rather, the different historical instances of ‘ethnic unmixing’ in the Balkans (Duijzings 2003) can indeed be viewed as ‘modern’ and ‘European’ (ibid.) and comprise diverse transnational socio-economic influences, most notably the spread of capitalism and the nation-state model (Verdery 1994). The latter represents the ground for the state/kin-state minorities constellation and hence the ‘securitization’ of the minority issue (Kymlicka 2002), which again led to perceiving nationalism in the Balkans along lines of ‘ethnicity’ rather than citizenship (Brubaker 2004; Verdery 1994). Although this potentially ethnocentric and teleological binary understanding is not sufficient to capture the complexity of identification and diversity in the Balkans, it reveals one important historical aspect of the salience of ethno-nationalist rhetoric and identification.

Exemplified by the diversification of citizenship regimes in the post-Yugoslav space, ethnocentric and multi-ethnic citizenship regimes clearly ‘beat’ the civic model (Shaw and Štiks 2013). However, as, for example, post-war Bosnia shows, civic citizenship also is a desired option of identification and belonging for a sizable number of individuals. In this case, however – rather than ‘inherent’ ethno-nationalism – it is precisely the internationally installed Dayton ‘multi-ethnic citizenship’ regime that de facto prescribes ethically based political participation (Štiks 2011) and hence excludes the constitutional categories of ‘others’ and ‘citizens’ from enjoying full political rights2 (Štiks 2011; Tošić 2009).

Although in a different way, as in the west European context characterized by colonialism and extensive work migration, mobility crucially diversified the Balkans through history up to the present (e.g. Roth and Hayden 2009). Notwithstanding its potential to strengthen ethno-national identification – in intersection with other factors such as socio-legal exclusion in the host country (e.g. Dahinden 2010) – migration also unsettles ethno-nationalism in the Balkans. For example, the intersection of generation, legal status and forced migration is of significance here. Namely, often precisely those generations that have experienced war, flight and emigration in their youth – as my first ethnographic example (on p. 155) will show – tend to take a more cosmopolitan, civic and multidimensional stance towards identity and belonging.

Socio-economic factors – for example, personal ties based on ethno-national belonging in the context of the economy of shortage – can contribute to the salience of ethno-nationalism (Verdery 1994). Furthermore, the urban–rural dynamics in the Balkans shows how ethno-nationalism and migration-related differences become ‘culturalized’ and ‘ethnicized’ and at worst are manifested in ‘ethno-national’ violence as, for example, in Bosnia or Kosovo (e.g. Bougarel 1999; Duijzings 2003). Simultaneously, other cases exemplify crucially different, if not directly opposing, urban–rural diversity and integration patterns. Hence, legacies of urban diversity regimes in north Albania incorporating (rural) migrants along a middle-class discourse of ‘urbanity’ rather than ethno-nationalism or religion (Tošić forthcoming a) or the re-appropriation of cosmopolitan urban diversity patterns by young artists and entrepreneurs opposing the top-down ‘nationalization’ of urban space in Skopje (Janev 2012) highlight the importance of temporality and multidimensionality of diversity practices in the Balkans.

Notwithstanding the patriarchal and homophobic gender regime grounding the provincial (Blagojević 2011) nationalist (e.g. Verdery 1996) ideology, reframing difference and inequality along gender crucially disturbs one-dimensional readings of diversity in the Balkans. As, for example, the case of new social movements in Serbia shows (see p. 156) – in synergy with...
anti-war feminist interventions – different groups of activists (alterglobalist, anarcho-syndicalist, LGBT, student, anti-militaristic, urban, etc.) do not only oppose ethno-nationalism, but also unmask it as a political manoeuvre to distract the citizen’s attention away from neoliberal reforms. By opposing all forms of discrimination and exploitation and encouraging social solidarity on a regional and global scale, these initiatives advocate a multidimensional conception of diversity and a trans-ethnic and anti-authoritarian society (Grubačić 2012).

**Powder kegs, mosaics, salads . . . unsettling the hegemonic images of diversity in the Balkans**

It comes as no surprise that anthropological engagements with the Balkans – combining the ethnographic focus on the multi-level complexity of everyday life and a critical stance towards hegemonic discourses and metaphors – unsettle both negative and positive Balkanist stereotypes. Hence, both the metaphors of ‘Balkanization’ and the ‘powder keg’ can simultaneously be read as synonyms for ‘barbarianism’ and the expression of ‘ultimate Europeanization’ (Todorova 2009: 13). Similarly, images such as the ‘mosaic’ or the ‘Macedonian salad’ reveal the dominant (Jansen 2005), yet essentialist (Green 2005: 128), perceptions of diversity patterns in the Balkans, occluding dimensions such as urbanity, rurality, gender, class, generation and occupation in favour of ethno-national identification (Bougarel et al. 2007: 2).

While engaging with the Balkans from myriad perspectives, anthropologists are critically thinking through alternative imaginaries. As a common way to challenge essentialist and primordial concepts of identity, and thus a useful conceptual tool for capturing a wide range of cases in the Balkans, the notion of ‘hybridity’, however, is also inextricably interwoven with discourses of purity and can thus produce essentialist frameworks of exclusion (Ballinger 2004). Another way of refuting the primordialist ‘ancient hatreds’ stereotype and highlighting common patterns of peaceful co-existence in diversity is the use of the notions of ‘ambiguity’ and ‘fluidity’ (Duijzings 2003). Through the metaphor of the ‘fractal’, the ambiguous, fluid and ‘chaotic intermingling’ of peoples and territories in the Balkans (Green 2005: 132) becomes abstractly tangible as a process of ‘relational fragmentation’ into ever smaller ‘utterly relational’ and ‘endlessly recomposing’ parts (ibid.: 130).

**Concluding ethnographic outlooks: among refugees, borderers and activists**

I will conclude with three ethnographic ‘screen shots’ on how the focus on the views and social practices of subaltern and counter-hegemonic social actors – whose lives are also crucially marked by different forms of mobility – can contribute to moving further towards a nuanced and multidimensional approach to diversity in the Balkans. The following ethnographic vignettes ‘unpack’ diversity in the Balkans, its prominent dimension of ethno-nationalism included, along the intersections of forced migration, urbanity and generation; socio-spatiality (at a borderland), kinship, multilingualism and citizenship; and socio-political identification and transnational mobility.

**New Belgrade, 1998**

‘This war displaced me back into the fourteenth century. I, a young urban sneaker-wearing guy, a cineaste and rock music fan was suddenly supposed to be Milos Obilić.’ So said Darko in a perfect Belgrade slang, as if he had always lived in the capital of his ‘mother-land’ to which he
had fled from war-torn Croatia three years earlier. In our countless conversations at the Belgrade flea-market – where he tried to make a living alongside, for example, cosmopolitan unemployed teachers, ultra-nationalist youngsters from Zemun, former university professors and street sellers from diverse Roma settlements – Darko was criticizing the nationalist project pursued by segments of the Serbian intellectual and political elite. Identifying as a cosmopolitan, an anti-militarist and a child of the ‘trans-ethnic’ golden years of Yugoslav Rock Music – which have perished with the rise of ethno-nationalist mobilization – Darko was primarily longing to see the world. For him – as for innumerable young people in 1990s Serbia – forced immobility due to citizenship was even harder to bear than the threat of mobilization or the harsh winters at the open-air flea-market.

Surroundings of Tuzi, close to the Montenegrin–Albanian border, 2012

‘We are real Montenegrins according both to origin and citizenship, but now we feel like Muslim Albanians. While living in Albania, however, we never thought of giving up our Yugoslav citizenship.’ This paraphrase illustrates how the two brothers Safet and Husein – whose biographies and family history are marked by bilingualism, repeated migration within the Montenegrin–Albanian borderland and conversion to Islam – kept stressing the ‘implicitness’ of their pluri-national identity. Beyond the latter – intersecting with mobility, confession, citizenship and bilingualism – their main dimension of belonging is kinship, which itself is actually ‘grounding’ their ‘hybrid’ and ‘fluid’ identification. Namely, the Sarapa family – to which the brothers belong – exemplifies a highly inclusive and borderland-specific genealogy-based kinship practice spanning all local ethno-national and religious categories. The common occurrence of such inclusive kinship networks and practices in the Montenegrin–Albanian borderland can be considered as one important factor in the absence of ethno-national violence in this part of the Balkans (Tošić forthcoming b).

Belgrade Old Town, 2003, and Jajinci (outskirts of Belgrade), 2004

‘We oppose the false dichotomy between neoliberal globalization on the one hand and nationalism and patriarchy on the other!’, stressed Marija, a feminist and anti-war activist at a conference entitled ‘Globalization of Social Justice and Equality’, which had brought together a number of activists, NGO representatives, anarchists, academics and other citizens from Belgrade and other parts of Serbia and former Yugoslav republics. While introducing the conference theme – universal values of justice and equality – Marija notably pointed out that ‘universality for us does not mean uniformity, but precisely diversity’. A year later, a number of the conference participants reassembled at the third European People’s Global Action (PGA) Conference in a school building in Jajinci (Belgrade). Apart from representing the first large-scale event of this sort in ‘Post-Yugoslavia’, this local meeting of a transnational social movement not only gathered together activists from all over Europe (and beyond), but also included highly diverse social actors: trade union, minority and NGO representatives; anti-militarist, anarchist, LGBT, feminist and other activists; and the local population. While mingling and being amazed by the unprecedented diversity of languages, clothing styles, food and activities in their neighbour-hood, the locals of this Belgrade suburb could read the following programmatic lines on the conference flyer:

Together we are working on the establishment of a new political space – both beyond political parties and the so-called non-governmental sector. . . . We delimit ourselves from
the concept of ‘civil’, which we replace by the notion of a ‘solidary society’. We insist upon a veritable and equitable dialogue among all members of society, many of which are forgotten both by political parties and the ‘civil society’s’ NGOs – the workers, the unemployed, the refugees, the Roma, the peasants, the activists and many more.

Notes

1 A considerable degree of realization of equality and social justice (e.g. reducing illiteracy, free education, social security, gender equality) must, however, not be glossed over.

2 Persons not belonging to one of the three official ethnicities (Bosniak, Croat and Serb) cannot run for presidency and other ethnically defined positions (Štiks 2011: 259).

3 The Serbian mythic-historical figure of the assassin of Sultan Murad I in the background of the battle of Kosovo in 1389.

References


—(forthcoming a) ‘Shkodër, the “City of the Calm people”: Urban Diversity and Migration Legacies in a Balkan Border Town’, *MMG MPI Working Paper*.