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ORTHODOX “IMAGINED COMMUNITIES”
IN THE OTTOMAN BALKANS

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As a young scholar being trained in Early Modern European history, I imbibed unstated assumptions along with the canons of western historiography. My teaching and research career, though, soon moved eastward, to focus on Byzantium, the Balkans, and the Eastern Christianity which permeated both. With this transition, I became uneasily aware of how little attention western scholarship has given to these fields,¹ or to the momentous developments which took place in the eastern half of the European continent.² Some of these developments challenge and undermine some hallowed scholarly perspectives; among them is the assessment commonly held among western scholars about the emergence of a sense of nation and nationalism.

Nations and Nationalism

The idea of “nation” requires a mental exercise of some creativity. It takes little cerebral

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¹Earlier versions of this paper were presented at a Philosophy Department colloquium held at Southern Connecticut State University (March 2011) and at the European Conference on Social and Behavioral Sciences held in Istanbul (June 2013).

²This pattern has marked education in the English-speaking world both in Britain and in North America. It led John Julius Norwich to produce a three-volume history of Byzantium, which he condensed into a single book, A Short History of Byzantium (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997); he intended his study to offer “some small amends” for the glaring omission of Byzantium in western educational curricula (xli [cf. xxxix]).

agility to recognize members of one’s family and broaden that to include one’s circle of acquaintances in a rather obvious societal group. But envisaging something as broad and wide as a “nation” entails conceiving of larger relationships, encompassing people one might never see or interact with.

“Imagined Communities”

In 1983, Benedict Anderson coined the term “imagined communities” as a way of describing this perception. His contribution on this score aptly summarized and sharpened the way scholars in the fields of political science and history have analyzed the notion of “nation” and its ideological spawn, “nationalism.” Western scholarly perspectives on this question have focused on what transpired in Western Europe; unquestionably, the sense of nation and nationalism into which it ensued has significantly influenced the development of Western Europe and North America during the very period in which the West has exercised great influence throughout the world—namely, the last 500 years. That viewpoint ended up being exported to the rest of the world, so much of which had been swallowed up in Western European colonial empires; ironically, it eventually contributed significantly to the dismantling of those empires. The larger world has thus unquestionably been profoundly impacted by this sense of nation and nationalism.

Developments in Western Europe

The common historiographical assessment of the concept of “nation” urges that during the Middle Ages, the inhabitants of Western Europe had no particular sense of belonging to any such collectivity. For the vast majority, who would never travel further than five kilometers from

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their birthplace, family and village acquaintances included the totality of their world--any sense of larger organizations, with the exception of the Church, was beyond their mental frontiers. That exception was an undeniably significant one, though: during the early medieval period, through the thirteenth century, the only overarching organization in Western Europe was the Christian Church. It commanded whatever loyalty the common person could muster to a larger entity than those composed of faces he/she could regularly see. The promised prospect of salvation from God and an utterly changed state for the blessed lay beyond their understanding but not their hope or loyalty.

As the fourteenth century dawned, with famine intruding in the wake of two decades of poor harvests, combined in short order with the horrors occasioned by the Bubonic Plague, plus regular outbreaks of rebellion against rapacious local magnates, Western Europeans instinctively turned toward the Church for succor and guidance. But the Church—the sole previously recognized body greater than the local universe everyone inhabited—was passing through its own specific tribulations. With the Avignon Papacy (1309-1378) followed immediately by the chaos of the Great Schism (1348-1415), and succeeded in short order by the Renaissance Papacy (more consumed with beautifying Rome than with spiritual care), the Church managed to convince all but the hardiest of believers that it hardly deserved temporal confidence, even if it remained the only broker of eternal hope.4

But during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as confidence in the ministrations of the Church was waning, the nation-states of Western Europe were becoming better integrated around significant royal leaders. Whatever their particular title—king, grand duke, or prince—these major leaders, surrounded by influential advisers from noble families and other grandees, began

4 For a discussion of this, see my Getting the Reformation Wrong: Correcting Some Misunderstandings (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2010), 23-51.
to make significant impact on the lives of the inhabitants of the regions they ruled. With all this,⁵ loyalties began shifting to those magnates because of the perceived benefits of living under their rule, which included safety against invaders and some semblance of law and order. Thus the beginnings of a sense of “nation” dawned in Western Europe; people were aware to some degree of a benefit shared with others beyond their immediate circle of acquaintances, a benefit associated collectively with this ruler (and his successors). For the members of that royal court and the broader company of nobles more intimately associated with that ruler, the sense of “nation” was even stronger. But in all this, the budding sense of “nation” revolved around the ruler; it had little to do with a sense of anything shared among those he ruled, except the benefits of that rule. This pattern obtained through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and most of the eighteenth.

But with the coming of the French Revolution in 1789, a rebellion against a distant king from whom little benefit seemed any longer to come to the inhabitants of the “nation” he ruled, a revolution culminating in the execution of that king, an extraordinary anomaly arose: in the name of the people misruled—the “nation” of France—the rebels had eliminated the focus of the only previous sense of “nation” they (or anyone else) had developed. To meet this desideratum, intellectuals among the rebels articulated another sense of “nation”—this time, not focused on the ruler but on the people.⁶ According to the revised definition, “nation” focused on a “people” who were a “nation” because of what they shared—namely, history, language, and culture. This common background bound these people together and constituted them a “nation.”⁷ This new

⁵ See the insightful treatment by Bernard Guenée, States and Rulers in Later Medieval Europe (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1988).
⁶ Jean Jacques Rousseau played a leading role in initiating this development, even though his particular approach did not become the accepted viewpoint.
⁷ Carlton J.H. Hayes, with Hans Kohn often considered the founding fathers of academic scholarship on nationalism, embraces this view, articulated in the wake of the French Revolution, as the best understanding of what a nation is; see his discussion in “What is Nationalism?”, 1-29 in his Essays on Nationalism (New York: Russell & Russell,
view of “nation” both justified the rebellion which had taken place and set a new path into the future for that nation—the French people who shared a common history, language, and culture. As this notion took root, it became an ideology, “nationalism.” But before that could be nurtured, the notion itself needed to be inculcated among the French “nation” which had not hitherto understood itself in this fashion: that is, they needed to see and understand themselves, as the French nation, in terms of that shared history, language, and culture.

As a startled Europe looked on and listened in, people in other regions discerned a message of hope for themselves and others with whom they shared history, language, and culture, but endured disunity or repressive imperial rule. These notions took time to win allegiance; by the time they caught on widely outside of France, the nineteenth century was underway—and so this view has sometimes been called “nineteenth-century nationalism.” As against the Enlightenment with its elitist appeal to intellectuals via reason, this sense of nation appealed to what the common people as a whole shared, so it has also been styled “Romantic” nationalism. By whatever name this viewpoint goes, though, this view of “nation” and its ideological spawn, nationalism—focused on the people and what they share—has unquestionably had significant influence, not only in Western Europe, but in far-flung regions of the world.

The scholarly perspective on this sense of nation and nationalism in western scholarship has confidently claimed that this phenomenon first found expression in Western Europe (specifically, France) in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Western scholars recognize that nationalistic longings have burst forth around the world, but the assumption is that the sense of nation requisite to all such longings—namely, a shared history, language, and culture—first

1966), especially 6-7, 21.
found expression in Western Europe.8

Problems with this Assessment

In reflecting on this common scholarly viewpoint, three points deserve to be noted. Firstly in 1991 when Benedict Anderson's revised edition of his book was published, he lamented “an unselfconscious provincialism” among scholars in the field, “accustomed to the conceit that everything important in the modern world originated in Europe.”9 His assessment would have been more accurate if he had added the adjective, “Western,” before “Europe”—for reasons to be laid out below.

Secondly, it is important to recognize that, while Anderson gave some treatment to religion vis-à-vis the emergence of nationalism, he did so as a predecessor movement which embraced much larger entities than a “nation” could be (specifically referring to the “umma” of Islam and to Christendom).10 This overlooks the role religion has regularly played in shaping cultures, including the “cultures” which various respective “nations” could share (along with history and language). It makes historical sense that he did so, for the French Revolution was marked by a strong animus against the shared religious background the French people had known in Roman Catholicism. However, positing such distance from religion was neither necessary for the development of “nation” and “nationalism” nor accurate in describing its earlier emergence, as will be seen below.

8 For examples of this, see the comments by one of the recognized leaders in the study of nationalism, Hans Kohn, in The Age of Nationalism: The First Era of Global History (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 3-5; also, his The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in its Origins and Background (Toronto: Collier Books, 1969), 10-11, 14-15; as well, his Nationalism: Its Meaning and History, rev. ed. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1965), 9; for a brief rendition of the historical course of “The Received Sense of Nationalism” among scholars, see K.R. Minogue, Nationalism (London: B.T. Batsford, 1967), 19-21; Minogue also specifically points out that the leading scholars in the field view nationalism as first arising in the wake of the French Revolution (17).

9 Anderson, Imagined Communities, xiii.

10 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 12-19.
This assessment is corroborated, thirdly, by what some other scholars in the field have recently published about the role played by religion in the emergence of nation and nationalism. Several such studies have appeared, arguing for the significant influence religion exercised in shaping notions of nation and nationalism. Significantly, many of these still focus on developments in Western Europe, thus falling again under Anderson's critique about (Western) European provincialism. In so doing, they fail to recognize a much earlier development of a sense of nation and nationalism, definitely rooted—in surprising ways—in religion.

**BALKAN NATIONS**

In southeastern Europe, religion played a dominant role in shaping notions of “nation” and “nationalism.” In the Balkans, two religions—Islam and Orthodox Christianity—interacted in ways that ensured the development of a sense of nation and of nationalism much earlier than western scholarship has recognized.

**Ottoman Millet**

In 1454, the year after conquering Constantinople, Sultan Mehmet II made a momentous decision regarding the organization of his burgeoning empire. By this time, the Ottomans ruled over all of Asia Minor and almost all of the Balkans; what little remained of the latter soon fell under his onslaughts. In many regards, the Ottoman Empire and its rulers manifested less deliberation about their domains and what they hoped to achieve as leaders of the Muslim world than their predecessors in Damascus under the Umayyads, or in Baghdad under the Abbasids, or in Andalusian Spain under another branch of the Umayyads. But in the decision Mehmet made in 1454, he showed remarkable insight into his own realm and into the diverse peoples over whom

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he and his minority of fellow Muslims now ruled in Southeastern Europe. The peoples he had conquered in the Balkans had been Christian—either Western Catholic or Eastern Orthodox—for centuries. To meet this challenge effectively, Mehmet established the “millet” system. To understand its significance, both for his realm and then for the question of the genesis of a sense of “nation” and “nationalism” among Balkan peoples, we need to consider some background information.

1. The Muslim Worldview

According to Islam, Muslims are members of one large community, the “umma,” which includes all Muslims in the world. The umma is to be the ultimate focus of loyalty and allegiance while Muslims live on earth. Given that, for a Muslim to embrace what we know as “nationalism” would long have been viewed as reneging on allegiance to the umma. It was not until the late nineteenth century that Muslim teaching began to accommodate the idea that Muslims could legitimately identify themselves in a nationalistic sense with a nation; even then, though, ultimate loyalty belonged to the umma. So, while our investigations into the provenience of nation and nationalism in the Balkans take us to an enactment by a sultan of the Ottoman Empire, we will not find that genesis in this portion of the Muslim worldview.

Islam had no expectation that all those whom its armies conquered would become Muslims. It was sufficient that theocratic rule be instituted to the honor of Allah. In that regard, special privilege was accorded to the “peoples of the book”—that is, Jews and Christians—who, according to Islamic teaching, had received Allah’s prior stages of revelation in (respectively) the Jewish Scriptures and the Gospels. These “protected people” were called “dhimmi.” Protection came at a price, though: dhimmi had to pay a special tax and faced some specific limitations in what they could do. This had been the pattern adopted in the initial spread of
Muslim power out of the Arabian peninsula throughout the whole of what had previously been
the Persian Empire, Egypt and the Maghreb in North Africa, Spain, and (eventually) all of the
Byzantine Empire.

2. The New Situation for Ottoman Rule

But with the final conquest of the lynchpin of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople, in
1453, a different situation confronted the Turkish sultan than any preceding Muslim ruler had
faced. In previous centuries, Muslims had conquered territories which had not known religious
unity: the Persian Empire followed, by and large, Zoroastrianism—which was not a religion of
the book and so was roughly treated; the “Nestorian” and “Monophysite” Christians in Persia, as
well as in Syria and Palestine, were not the dominant religions in the realm; and in Andalusian
Spain, previous tensions and distances between Visigothic conquerors committed to Arianism
and the Catholic Christians they ruled had precluded shared religious loyalty.12

But the situation was drastically different in Southeastern Europe. There, the various
peoples had embraced either Western Catholic Christianity or Eastern Orthodox Christianity
some five centuries previously. Their respective commitments had been fired in the conflicts that
broke out among the various kingdoms that arose in the Balkans, which ended up with Catholic
Croats ruling Orthodox Serbs, then Bulgarian Orthodox conquering Orthodox Serbs and
threatening Orthodox Byzantium, Orthodox Serbs later conquering Greek Orthodox and
Bulgarian Orthodox alike and also threatening Orthodox Byzantium, and Bosnians affiliated with
a schismatic Bosnian church still later attacking Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats. In all this,

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12 To be sure, the Visigothic king Reccared (r. 586-601) came to see that if he and his people were to have any hope
of consolidating the peninsula into a unity, it would have to be on the basis of Catholic Christianity, which he
officially embraced at the Third Council of Toledo in 589. Since the Visigoths had ruthlessly repressed their
Catholic subjects since the conquest of the peninsula (c. 410), though, those subjects were leery of too readily
trusting their overlords. Civil and religious unity had not been achieved by 711, when Muslim forces burst into the
Spanish peninsula.
state commitments embraced Christianity in its western or its eastern form, and kingdoms struggled with nearby kingdoms which often held the same version of the faith. Significantly, following the organizational patterns of Orthodox Christianity, both the Bulgarian and the Serbian churches became “autocephalous,” governing themselves as the churches of their respective people groups.

What Mehmet II faced was a very different situation among his subject peoples than any previous Muslim leader had known. His decision to organize Ottoman oversight of the dhimmi in his realm in a more official way than any Muslim ruler ever had, by establishing millets for his non-Muslim subjects, ended up assuring that the various major subject peoples would develop a sense of nation and nationalism13 centuries earlier than in Western Europe.

3. The Millet System

In contemporary Turkish, “millet” means “nation,” with all the notions associated with the term in today's political parlance. However, in the fifteenth century, “millet” carried no associations with borders, government, or any of the normal accoutrements with which a nation would be decked out in the present. “Millet” then found its connotation within the Islamic worldview. Muslims recognized that the “peoples of the book” were “other” than Muslims but still constituted a community as those who earlier in history had been called into being by divine revelation. Mehmet used the term “millet” to describe the large religious groupings among the dhimmi in his realm. The Orthodox millet was by far the largest; most Christians in the Balkans had embraced Orthodoxy, whether as Byzantines, Bulgarians, Serbs, or the people later known as Romanians. A second millet included the considerable numbers of Armenians within the Ottoman realm, along with the Catholics (mostly found among Croats, some Albanians, and the

Hungarians who had been swallowed up by Ottoman conquests). A third millet was comprised of the Jews in the realm, both Sephardic and Ashkenazic. In territorial terms, these millets overlapped each other: they were bounded not by borders but by religious commitment. The only significant consideration was which of the millets a person belonged to; this offered a refinement of preceding Muslim practices with dhimmi, distinguishing among them in an official and organizational sense.

In each millet, the chief religious leader—for the Orthodox, the patriarch of Constantinople; for the Armenian/Catholic one, the Armenian Catholicos; for the Jews, the chief rabbi—was responsible for the good behavior of the millet he oversaw. While the members of the millet were entitled to govern themselves by their respective religious traditions, common practices, and laws (as long as these did not intrude on Muslim law), they were still subject to Ottoman control. The millet system assured that the chief religious leader of each millet remained responsible directly to the sultan—who, if displeased, might well replace that leader or order his execution.

**Orthodox Nations and Nationalism**

While the respective situations of all three millets each is intriguing in its own right, for our investigation, we focus especially on the Orthodox millet. It comprised the vast majority of the Christian subjects in Ottoman territory. It was among the Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire that, under the impress and influence of the millet system, a sense of nation and nationalism developed—and did so long before the events of 1789 in France.

The imposition of the millet system was resented by the subject peoples of the Ottoman Empire, as part of the unwelcome burden of foreign rule. But the prior histories of those peoples had prepared them to survive within that system and—with a view to what would become a
sense of nation and nationalism—even to flourish because of it. A brief rehearsal of the prior history will help us get our bearings in this regard.

The Byzantine Empire, Bulgaria, and Serbia had embraced Orthodox Christianity and had witnessed the conflicts between it and Western Christianity (as manifested in the tensions around the crusades, and especially the horrors of the Fourth Crusade of 1204). While it cannot readily be claimed that the common people or even the leaders understood the differences between the two Christian confessions in any particular depth, the way they reacted to Western Christianity necessitates the recognition that each of these people groups was firmly committed to its Orthodox confession when they were brought under Ottoman rule. With the small percentages in each group that availed themselves of the advantages afforded anyone who converted to Islam, it is clear that they remained committed to that Christian confession.

Beyond that, each of these nations had experienced tensions and warfare with its Orthodox neighbors, as noted above. Through these conflicts, each people group had become aware of nearby “others” who embraced the same pattern of faith and practice while still being opponents. It should also be remembered that their respective avowals of Orthodoxy were of long standing.

What all this means is that the respective people groups’ commitment to their Orthodox confession had been deepened by the passage of time and fired by conflict with others. When the Muslims took over and reduced all these Christian peoples to *dhimmi* status, Greeks (as previous Byzantines came to be known), Bulgars, and Serbs all profoundly resented both their loss of independence and being ruled by a non-Christian power. But while the Bulgarians and the Serbs were Orthodox, they also resented their submission under the patriarch of Constantinople for two reasons. In the first place, both people groups had their own autocephalous churches before the
Ottoman occupation, both saw their group as distinct from the Byzantine Greeks, and both wanted their self-governing churches back. Secondly, as the generations passed, the (Greek) patriarch in Constantinople increasingly seemed to Bulgarians and Serbs too much the servant of the Ottoman sultan—and too Greek! Careful placement of his Greek confreres as the hierarchs throughout the Orthodox millet perhaps had assured him of better subordinates, but their loyal administrations insured resentment on the part of the Bulgarian and Serbian Orthodox faithful, who saw the Greek leaders as manipulating their privileges for Greek dominance. With that, the submission of Bulgarians and Serbs became ever more hesitant and suspicious. This all led them eventually to repudiate the leadership of the patriarch of Constantinople. By the sultan's decision, the autocephalous status of the Serbian Orthodox Church was restored in 1557, only to be taken away again in 1766, with autocephaly returning in 1848. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church only received its autocephalous status again, also by the sultan's permission, in 1870.

What this all shows, in summary fashion, is that these members of the Orthodox millet in the Ottoman Empire could and did remain staunch in both their religious commitment and in their determination to remain Bulgarian or Serb. The millet system served as midwife to the birth of a sense of nation and nationalism for the Balkan peoples.

This assessment is confirmed by the striking way these subject peoples viewed those of their number who converted to Islam. When this transpired—as it did in small percentages among both Bulgarians and Serbs—those who converted were not considered Bulgarian or Serbian Muslims—rather, they were considered “Turks.” Not only were they no longer in the Orthodox millet—these converts were no longer either Bulgarian or Serb. They had not, of

14 In due course, as the peoples of Romania coalesced into a nation, they came to similar assessments of the Orthodox patriarch and the Byzantine Greeks as the Serbs and Bulgars; however, since the Romanians had not come to their national self-awareness until well into the lengthy period they spent in the Ottoman Empire, this study does not focus on them. Even so, the perspectives of the Serbs and Bulgarians described below came to mark Romanian viewpoints.
course, changed their genetic inheritance, but for the subject peoples of the Balkans, to change religious commitment was to “become” a member of another “nation.”

In the Ottoman Empire, in the wake of the 1454 establishment of the millet system, a people group was identified by its particular religious commitment. Down through succeeding centuries, the way these peoples thought of themselves collectively had their group—i.e., their “nation”—and church all wrapped up together. In terms of what would later be espoused in the aftermath of the French Revolution as the “key” to identifying a “nation,” the Bulgarian and Serbian people groups within the Orthodox millet each indeed shared its own distinctive history, culture, and language. But more important for the development of the sense of nation and of nationalism among them, the preeminent element each shared as a nation in the long-standing Ottoman Empire was its religious commitment. These “nations” focused on their religion as what united them—for each nation, their shared history and culture flowed from their shared religious commitment. This was also true even of their languages; they were only allowed to teach and learn Bulgarian or Serbian in the schools established in the waning days of the Ottoman Empire by the sultan’s permission, given to prepare them to engage in the religious services of their respective national churches.

The foundational nature of this religious commitment even served to trump what otherwise might be held in common with neighbors. Even if other people groups had shared a fair amount of the history, culture, and language, Croats (committed to Western Catholic Christianity), Serbs (committed to Orthodoxy), and Bosnians (many or most of whom had converted to Islam), because of their divergent religious commitments, did not constitute a “nation.” They were “others,” different nations because they had different religious commitments.
So, when the subject peoples of the Ottoman Empire were exposed to the Romantic nationalism spawned in Western Europe, the Bulgars and Serbs were already focused preeminently on their religion as what bound each of them together in a strong sense of nation and nationalism. Their respective national commitments to Orthodox Christianity helped Bulgarians and Serbs “find” and identify themselves ever more clearly—with all the hopes and aspirations for national liberation from the rule of their Muslim overlords in the Ottoman Empire. In 1830, the Serbs achieved self-government within the Ottoman empire, with full independence following in 1868. Bulgaria followed a similar pattern, respectively, in 1878 and 1908.

**Conclusion**

The development of a sense of nation and nationalism among the Balkan peoples in the Ottoman Empire challenges the common way western scholars have thought and written about the genesis of nation and nationalism. That assessment assumes and builds on the experience of peoples in Western Europe and fits what transpired there. According to this perspective, in earlier centuries, only the upper classes had a sense of nation. While the common people might have a general awareness of certain tangible benefits from living under the governance of a particular ruler or dynasty, their notion of “nation” was quite limited. It only really awakened in the aftermath of the French Revolution, when these people came to understand that they shared a common history, culture, and language with many others, and that together they constituted a nation. This “sense” of nation, of this “imagined community,” thus took root not earlier than the late eighteenth century, but for most sometime during the nineteenth.

But what had transpired in the Balkans indicates that this scholarly reading is in error: for the subject peoples of the Ottoman Empire, the millet system made them inescapably aware of
belonging to a particular national community long before the French Revolution. With their previous history as nations and as autocephalous churches, with the millet system established as of 1454 and the way it shaped how people viewed themselves and their neighbors, historical data indicate that the Bulgarians and the Serbs viewed themselves as nations long before their Western European counterparts came to that collective self-awareness.15

In this regard (as in many others) western scholars have conducted their investigations and come to their conclusions without considering the history of Eastern Europe. It seems clear, from what we know of their prior histories, that the Balkan peoples who would be subsumed within the Ottoman Empire already had a significant sense of themselves as distinct from their neighbors before the Turks burst into Southeastern Europe. But even if that could be restricted to an awareness only among the upper classes in the period before the Ottomans took control, what we find among those subject peoples—when they no longer had any upper classes, in the wake of the Ottoman conquest—is a national self-awareness rooted in their religious commitment from deep within the fifteenth century already.

The common western scholarly assessment of how, when, and where the sense of nation and nationalism first saw the historical light of day is badly mistaken. What has been confidently presented by most western scholars in history or political science who have dealt with this question has missed the mark by at least 335 years and more than 2250 kilometers.

And it is perhaps worth noting that, in a significant way, such national self-awareness is a shared legacy of the Orthodox faith and the Muslim presence in Europe, since the millet system adopted for the Ottoman Empire paved the way for the Balkan sense of nation and nationalism, rooted in religious commitment.