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# Dehexing Postwar West Balkan Masculinities: The Case of Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia, 1998 to 2015

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The analysis of post-Yugoslav and West Balkan masculinities remains, perhaps unsurprisingly, tethered to the study of interethnic warfare, postconflict reconciliation, and radical right-wing politics (Milojević 2012; Pavlović 1999; Irvine and Lilly 2007; Bracewell 2000; Hayden 2000; Munn 2008).<sup>1</sup> Although recent scholarship has explored more fully the position of men who do not benefit from the so-called patriarchal dividend (Milicević 2006; Zarkov 2001), West Balkan men are by and large studied as participants (whether active or passive) in a range of oppressive sociopolitical structures (Capriqi 2012; Rosić 2012). Although the scholarship analyzing the correlation between violence and West Balkan masculinity adds a unique and relevant nuance to the study of globalized violence, scholars too often study and depict traditional Balkan masculinities as an exclusively conservative bulwark against modernization writ large without advancing alternative understandings of West Balkan masculinity.<sup>2</sup> For the local intelligentsia and urban media outlets too, Balkan masculinity represents forces of isolationism and exclusivist ethno-nationalism, especially in the context of European integration. If one were to judge by current Bosnian, Croatian, or Serbian media commentary, the West Balkans are, no less than they were a hundred years ago, at the crossroads between traditionalization and modernization, with the patriarchal system actively sabotaging modernity's successful evolution in the region. Thus in both Western scholarship and West Balkan media outlets, masculine identities stand in for antimodern forces: backwardness, parochialism, and (neo-) traditionalism.

Even though aggression and violence in many respects certainly do define West Balkan masculinity, we emphasize the cultural spaces in

which hegemonic masculinity does not reign supreme. Rather than cast traditional Balkan masculinity as unequivocally antimodern, we frame it as a masculinity conditioned by the challenges stemming from the postwar and postsocialist transition processes. After the relative liberalization of gender norms during the Yugoslav period (1945–1991), the Yugoslav Wars of Succession (1991–1999) directly and indirectly catalyzed a retraditionalization of society in general and gender roles in particular (Listhaug, Ringdal, and Simkus 2011; Buchenau 2011; Kamenov and Jugovic´ 2011; Ilisin et al. 2013). The postwar period in the newly independent states of former Yugoslavia generated a generalized instability attending both new market economies and postwar democratic transition. Overlaying those dynamics were also the uncertainties tied to the expansion of the European Union. The combination of these destabilizing factors has created a space in which national gender norms have entered a state of flux. The attitude toward masculinity has, in general, become increasingly ambiguous and multivalent—although traditional norms have not lost their primacy in public life. Both the music and film industries simultaneously challenge and affirm normative gender and sexuality roles, creating a dynamic field of cultural contestation.

Our main goal is thus to make the contemporary paradoxes of West Balkan masculinity visible and comprehensible, thus extricating the region and its men from the niche bogeyman function they have played in transition studies. We maintain that it is necessary to enlarge and add nuance to the perspectives on West Balkan masculinities because not doing so confirms the idea that the Balkans are a museum of masculinity in which “physical toughness and violence, sexual conquest and the subordination of women, guns, strong drink and moustaches feature

heavily” (Bracewell 2005, 88). Without ignoring the patriarchal logic that structures, and arguably dominates, much of sociopolitical and cultural life in the contemporary West Balkans, we understand West Balkan masculinity as more than a culturally recessive, antirational condition that makes Western-style modernity impossible. Our analysis gives voice to the dynamic and progressive currents of domestic cultural production without neglecting the still prevalent patriarchal norms that define West Balkan culture.

While it would be irresponsible to deny the sociological data that testify to the predominance of rigidly traditional masculine roles in the West Balkans, we maintain that examining these indicators alone flattens the sociocultural interplay between cultural production and social attitudes. Our goal is to complicate the uniform and static impressions that emerge from sociological data by critically analyzing West Balkan music and film. The examination of local musical and cinematic production serves to illustrate the fluidity and instability attending the representation of West Balkan masculinities.

Sociological surveys have been invaluable in measuring the extent to which intolerance and aggression have defined the everyday in post-Yugoslav nations. Violent incidents, whether verbal, psychological, or physical, are committed overwhelmingly by men against women as well as ethnic and/or sexual minorities. For instance, a 2010 survey of 2,500 Serbian women found that 31.8 percent of them experienced psychological violence during that one year while 48.7 percent stated they suffered some sort of abuse during their lifetime (Babović 2010, 52). Croatian women are equally vulnerable. Data from national criminal statistics indicate that as many as 11, 247 adult women were victims of

domestic violence in 2011 (Lesur, Stelmaszek, and Golden 2012, 67). The Bosnian Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees also notes that domestic violence constitutes one of the biggest challenges in Bosnia (Gender Action Plan of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2013–2017, 10).

In addition to the widespread misogyny, other, equally toxic, forms of discrimination define high school life, especially among the male population. A survey of 630 Serbian high school students conducted in 2011 confirmed that Serbian youth's view of women as inferior mirrors their prejudices against ethnic, national, and sexual minorities; 77 percent of high schoolers surveyed considered family to be a sacred institution and 44 percent would refuse to sit next to a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) student in school (Radoman 2011, 24, 42). Croatian high schoolers are no more tolerant than their Serbian counterparts. In a 2010 survey of approximately a thousand high school students, 46 percent expressed the view that homosexuality is a disease while approximately two-thirds think that LGBT persons should be forbidden to declare themselves publicly (Salaj and Bagić 2011, 61). In addition to intolerance, public violence has kept pace with the high levels of domestic violence after the end of the Yugoslav Wars of Succession. The 2011 Serbian survey discussed above also notes that 62 percent of Serbian high schoolers have witnessed at least one incident of physical violence (Radoman 2011, 48). In all these surveys, male respondents have been more likely to validate aggressive behavior.

Our analysis of contemporary Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian music and film provides an alternative view to the grim reality the surveys above reveal; we chart the ways in which filmmakers and popular musicians have begun to challenge the traditional social norms as well as non-normative

gender roles and relationships. Our methodology relies on using the most popular Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian cinematic and musical cultural production from 1998 to 2015. By analyzing both popular film and music as sources, we chart the fate and progression of the masculine subject since the end of authoritarian regimes of Slobodan Milosevic' in Serbia and Franjo Tudman in Croatia. In our analysis, we emphasize the evolution of alternative masculinities in West Balkan cultural production while recognizing its limits.

Given that the two art forms have contrasting business models and target different audiences, it is necessary to examine film and music together in order to understand views on masculinity from "on top" and "from below." Since music production depends almost exclusively on its ability to generate profit, its consumption patterns audibly echo the popular mood. West Balkan film, however, is largely state-subsidized through the domestic ministries of culture and is generally intended for the international film festival circuit. Although domestic films receive airtime on national broadcasts and are also shown in movie theaters, the national West Balkan film industries only rarely produce blockbusters that attract moviegoers in statistically significant numbers, that is, sell more than a quarter million tickets. We thus analyze music and film in tandem in order to both gauge national popular sentiments and establish the agendas of state and intellectual/artistic elites.

It should be noted that our conclusions largely reflect a male perspective since both film and music industries are dominated by men who are, by and large, educated, financially secure, and heterosexual. Although a female cohort of filmmakers has begun to emerge in the past decade, men continue to account for the vast majority of directors,

writers, and producers. The situation is similar in the music scene; even though female performers remain the mainstay of the turbo-folk scene, the production side is still run by men. The cultural production we analyze is thus limited to representing the sensibilities and priorities of cisgender males.

Table 1. Popularity of Music Genres in the West Balkans by YouTube Views.

Combined YouTube views of urban alternative music from West Balkans	Combined YouTube views of select turbo-folk music from West Balkans	Ratio
23,659,334	220,103,799	1:9.3

### Balkan Masculinity and the Politics of Music

To characterize precisely the tensions inherent in contemporary West Balkan masculine ideals, we examine two of the most popular musical styles in the region: turbo-folk and urban alternative music. Although the latter is dominant, the former commands a notable share of popular attention (Table 1). We selected tracks and videos that, taken together, total approximately 250 million YouTube views. The examples we chose are based on the sampling of twenty-three songs, which are representative of broader trends in West Balkan music between 1998 and 2015.

In addition to being the two most prevalent genres, turbo-folk and urban alternative music are necessary to analyze jointly since they serve as cultural divides in popular imagination. Turbo-folk fans self-represent

as affirming their national traditions and/or the Balkan regional identity more broadly. Fans of urban alternative genres, such as rock, punk, rap, reggae, and ska, identify much more closely with Western ideals that emphasize individualism, heterodoxy, and tolerance. In popular parlance—although not in practice—these two musical genres represent a kind of East-West civilizational divide for the Balkans (Baker 2008, 742–43). By contrast, the two music genres are also supposed to represent two different version of masculinity; in theory, turbo-folk ought to replicate faithfully the patriarchal and heteronormative standards dominant in the region, while the urban alternative performers often self-consciously aim to embody more progressive and pluralistic versions of masculinity. In practice, however, neither genre lives up to the ideological conventions that define it. The following two subsections make clear that both musical categories propagate contradictory tropes of West Balkan masculinities, tying local masculinities to traditional norms while at the same time introducing alternative models of masculine behavior.

### The Changing Face of Turbo-folk

We begin with turbo-folk, as it has dominated the West Balkan popular culture scene since the early 1990s. This region-specific cultural genre can most easily be defined as commercialized folk music that combines dance and techno beats with folk elements, represented by a female trilling voice and/or traditional regional instruments, such as an accordion. This broad definition somewhat obscures the historical and sociological complexity of this cultural phenomenon. To uncover fully its cultural specificity, we discuss its genealogy as well as its two distinct stages, each of which has

become a kind of soundtrack for its historical context. Moreover, these two stages propagate distinct male tropes and exhibit two kinds of gender politics.

Turbo-folk's "prehistory" is tied to a specifically Yugoslav 1960s hybrid musical form called "newly-composed folk music" (*novokomponovana narodna muzika*), which borrowed from various folk styles and structures indigenous to Serbia, Macedonia, and Montenegro, adding to them pop arrangements and instrumentation, such as synthesizers and electric guitars (Gordy 1999, 104). As ethnomusicologist Ljerka V. Rassmussen accurately points out, this style emerged to satisfy the cultural needs of the "transitional majority seeking to rid itself of the baggage of rural origin while psychologically unequipped to accept models of urban culture" (Archer 2012, 179).

Turbo-folk proper emerged in the early 1990s in Serbia, overlaying the folk melos of newly composed folk music with even more pop, techno, and dance arrangements. The "turbo" moniker appropriately marked the distance from the Serbian, Montenegrin, and Macedonian folk traditions that had originally inspired the genre in the 1960s. With increasing electronic and techno sounds, the ethnic melos had all but evaporated. Despite its urban roots and unambiguous Western sounds, turbo-folk has generally been seen as continuing to reflect the tastes of the "rurban" majority. Moreover, although the lyrics and music of this genre have always tended to be a-nationalist in nature and although it featured identifiably techno and dance stylistics, turbo-folk has nonetheless often been appropriated by those espousing hardline ethno-nationalist politics because of the genre's mass market appeal (Archer 2012, 188). Cultural theorist Alexei Monroe argues that turbo-folk played a crucial role in

sustaining Slobodan Milosevic's war machine, as it produced a highly volatile combination of nationalist propaganda, pop culture and deliberate sensory overload; he calls this mixture "Balkan hardcore." Monroe (2002) avers that Balkan hardcore was not just high-octane "party" music, but music perfect for paramilitaries in need of both national(ist) kitsch and high-adrenaline musical forms.

Turbo-folk of the 1990s and early 2000s relied heavily on misogyny, heterosexism, and patriarchal supremacy to widen its appeal. It featured the world of the criminal underground, of cheap thrills, and short lives; it was, above all, about reinforcing alpha militant structures around secret pacts, honor codes, and a dog-eat-dog mentality; ironically, the majority of turbo-folk stars were female. As gender scholar Ivana Kronja (2004, 103) put it, turbo-folk "encouraged the war-orientated, retrograde patriarchy and the prostitution and commodification of women, while accepting the iconography of Western mass culture, the values of the 'American dream,' 'body culture,' culture of leisure and consumption." So dominant was turbo-folk as a cultural force in Serbia during the 1990s that to this day Serbian liberal intellectuals and urban middle classes understand this genre as an expression of evil that turned back the hands of time, separated Serbia from Europe, and converted the nation into a pack of feral animals (Cirjakovic' 2012, 91). For Croat and Bosnian elites, turbo-folk still figures as a quintessential expression of Serbian popular culture; thus, turbo-folk's postwar popularity across the West Balkans recurrently stirs a full-blown cultural panic in Croatian and Bosnian media.

By 2005, approximately five years after Slobodan Milosevic' was ousted from power, turbo-folk entered its second, and current, stage. In the past ten years, the genre has turned away even more from its 1960s roots, as

it visually became akin to commercial hip-hop and began to aurally resemble pop music; it is common that songs include the verse-chorus form and focus on catchy hooks and melodies. Furthermore, because it lost its specifically Serbian, Montenegrin, and Macedonian melos by displacing the trilling voice and instruments traditional to the region, the current incarnation of turbo-folk—which we will henceforth refer to as pop-folk for the sake of clarity and distinction—shed its unique tie to Serbia’s wartime cultural context. This is especially clear when observing the region’s teenagers, who do not have personal memories of the wars; as they come of age, Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian teenagers alike overwhelmingly choose pop-folk as the soundtrack of their generation’s sensibility (Pavicic’ 2014).

Pop-folk’s market appeal spreads across the territories of former Yugoslavia as pop-folk artists brand themselves as Balkan performers, self-consciously emphasizing a general Balkan, rather than an ethno-specific, orientation. As such, their songs tacitly erase the ethnic borders that had become hardened over the course of the Yugoslav Wars of Succession. Historian Rory Archer points out that the genre is much more complex in terms of its political orientation since contemporary Balkan performers unify the formerly antagonistic states into a shared cultural space by celebrating the Balkans’ peripheral status vis-a`-vis Europe. He posits that “the nation-state is not explicitly mentioned, and there is instead a focus on a Balkan identification—a mental and spatial location that implicitly includes but also transcends the nation state, potentially generating a degree of transnational solidarity by implicitly imparting the feeling that the listener is part of a larger collective” (2012, 199). In this process, turbo-folk lessens the demands for its audiences to identify exclusively with their

ethnic origins. More broadly, it reorients the region's politics of belonging, creating a space in which all listeners can adopt a more multivalent ethno-national identity.

This evolution impacts regional masculinity constructs since it promotes a shared regional identity rather than a nationally exclusivist one.<sup>3</sup> If during the 1990s, turbofolk was seen as a distinctly Serbian product (its fans in Croatia and Bosnia proclaimed as traitors to the patriotic cause) today's pop-folk has created a space in which a genuine regional identity can be negotiated and cultivated. For men in the region, this allows for a broadening of how they understand their ethnic belonging. While this trend builds on the memories of, and even nostalgia for, the former Yugoslav experience, there is a careful avoidance of any specific reference to the failed state. This silence would imply that the musical producers are motivated more by financial rather than ideological priorities. Although market forces are driving this musical trend, the unintentional consequence is the resurrection of the idea of Yugoslav unity.

The prime examples of this trend are performers Sasa Kovacevic' and Dado Polumenta (a Serb and a Montenegrin respectively), who have established a several million strong fan base across the territory of former Yugoslavia. Their intention to establish a shared sociocultural region is obvious in their references to the Balkans as the region's new unifying identity marker. For instance, in a massively popular song "I love the Balkans," which has had over nineteen million views on YouTube, Dado Polumenta sings the now legendary lines: The Balkans are tattooed on my skin/Like my mother dwells in my heart/Nostalgia tugs at me/As do our people and our music. The Balkans that they publicize and depict in their

music videos is distinctly urban, young, and cosmopolitan while at the same evoking a deep emotional connection with the (generic) Balkan Volk. The performers sing of “our” people (nasi ljudi), harking back to the interethnic harmony of the Yugoslav era, while the video cleverly avoids identifying with any particular national setting. The clip is filled with generic nightlife, beach, and road scenes, suggesting that these men could find a welcoming reception wherever they found themselves. Because they are nowhere in particular, they belong everywhere.

The lessening emphasis on ethno-national belonging has been accompanied by a marked, if perhaps passing, change in pop-folk’s gender politics. The patriarchal and heteronormative content and style of 1990s turbo-folk has been slowly giving way to alternative visions of Balkan masculinity. The fetishization of commodity has essentially supplanted the primacy of exclusivist ethno-nationalism, so that male pop-folk artists have become poster boys for capitalist indulgence rather than national pride. The product placement in these videos is ubiquitous; luxury cars, timepieces, eyewear, clothing, alcoholic beverages, and electronics all play dominant roles in the performance of masculinity. Brands, rather than patriotic symbolism, order the visual presentation of postwar Balkan masculinity. Men’s bodies, too, have become thoroughly commodified. Male pop-folk performers are meticulously styled, flaunt tanned (if not always muscular) bodies, and inhabit modern minimalist architectural spaces. If they are ever shown in nature, they are either on an exotic beach location or riding a motorcycle on highways and empty country roads. This generic presentation, echoed ad nauseam in videos of all male pop-folk stars, marks a strange marriage between hip-hop stylistics and techno sounds, creating a localized expression of global musical trends. With this

commercially standardized visual logic emerges a curious paradox. On the one hand, pop-folk's male performers, like their hip-hop counterparts in the West, objectify female bodies and define masculine success in terms of material abundance. On the other hand, the ways in which pop-folk's male artists are being currently produced plays a crucial role in disassociating Balkan masculinity from the national collective, creating a kind of space in which men can reposition their relationship to the state and their Volk.

Although performers who celebrate both the Balkans and a modern consumerist lifestyle have garnered widespread popularity, the West Balkan public space still embraces performers who are rigidly nationalistic. During the wartime period musicians who relied on nationalistic and militaristic narratives, unsurprisingly, appeared in large numbers, but garnered different levels of attention in their respective nation-states.<sup>4</sup> For example, the Croatian pop-folk and rock scene continues to be dominated by one singer: Marko Perković Thompson. He enjoys stadium size popularity, astronomic YouTube visits, regular TV and radio appearances, and several multiplatinum albums. Thompson's entire oeuvre extols the necessity and inherent goodness of hierarchies: generational, gender, and ethnic; he presents a stable cosmos of rigid ethno-national and patriarchal values. In short, Thomson acts as a cultural outlet for those Croats who feel cheated by the postwar system and yearn for a conservative system of values. Similar performers are larger in number in Bosnia and Serbia but enjoy less cultural cache than Thompson.<sup>5</sup> Serbian performers who echo Thompson's worldview, such as Belletti Srbija, emphasize current-day issues and are more explicitly racist. The majority of the Serbian fan base consists of soccer "enthusiasts;" although popular, these songs are not

given the kind of attention and airtime in Serbia as Thompson's are in Croatia because of their overt bigotry. Similarly, nationalistic Bosnian entertainers, although relevant to a particular cross section of the population, such as the veterans, have played a much more diminished role in Bosnian culture compared to their heyday in the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> All in all, male pop-folk performers who have steered away from ethnic exclusivism have garnered more attention than male performers who have remained faithful to the cultural formulas typical of the 1990s.

Female, rather than male, pop-folk performers are more cardinally reconfiguring the region's gender politics. Since 2005, the divas of pop-folk have emerged with performances and videos that appear to be more overtly transgressive in their stylistics. Most recently, one of the contributors of the popular Balkanist online journal insightfully proposed that the West Balkan, and particularly Serbian, culture has begun to evince a penchant for queer performativity. The author argues that outsiders have by and large remained "blind to the queer side of Serbian pop culture in general—even though it's pretty hard to miss when today's music videos, performances and concerts spill over with oiled-up orange muscle men, fierce divas, flamboyant drag performances and even rainbow flags, all to a soundtrack of sick synths and thundering club beats" (Eurovicious 2014a).<sup>7</sup> This sentiment certainly rings true since in the past decade female pop-folk's performers in Serbia have embraced edgier and tougher personas that do not (exclusively) cater to men's voyeuristic gaze. Taking the issue of female emancipation even further, media scholar Dijana Jelaca contends that turbo-folk and pop-folk owe their lasting appeal to the fact that they promise upward mobility to its female audience,

“repositioning them away from precarity and a lack of social power” (2015, 39).

It is easy to see Jelaca’s argument in the videos of the most notable pop-folk stars since they present male bodies as objects, evaluating male companionship exclusively in terms of sexual services they render. The most literal iteration of this trend is Goga Sekulic’s song “Ken Doll.” Goga essentially reduces the need for a male relationship to satisfying her corporeal needs. The stylistics of the video reinforce men’s limited role as all the models wear only underwear and appear throughout as plastic mannequins/dummies; one is even presented in transparent oversized packaging, awaiting Goga’s pleasure. Mia Borisavljevic’s video “Gruva Gruva” also unmistakably objectifies the male body, dressing up nubile, hardened, and bronzed bodies of young models in stereotypical nationalistic symbolism of the skimpy variety: tight underwear featuring the Serbian flag, a (faux) heavy moustache, and traditional Serbian footwear. The clip in many ways mimics the dynamics of a drag show; the pop-folk diva is a bigger-than-life personality displaying exaggerated feminine features while her adoring coterie consists of interchangeable lithe go-go boys. In this way, both Mia and Goga explicitly turn the patriarchal typology on its head and popularize this sleight of hand among mainstream audiences. Men emerge as decorative and convenient but, above all, temporary and replaceable elements in a woman’s life.

Another, perhaps darker and more violent, dimension of this pop-folk phenomenon are those divas who more or less forcefully disavow or threaten men. By 2010 in particular, it has not been uncommon for pop-folk divas to fully embrace a sadomasochistic theme and style. For instance, Dijana Jankovic’s song “Easy Man” presents a woman scorned,

berating her lover's inability to resist cheap thrills. As she reflects on her contempt, the video features several latex-clad dominatrices who collectively administer punishment on a blindfolded man handcuffed to a bed. Rarely turning toward the camera to satisfy the male gaze, the dominatrices and their quest for justice appear to be the focus of the video. In a similar approach, the megadiva of the Serbian pop-folk scene, Jelena Karleusa, features a distinctively combative tune entitled "Woman-Hater." In it, she tells a story of a woman whose life was ruined by a chance encounter with the wrong guy. Following this encounter, the heroine has a new life philosophy that seems decidedly sadistic: I'll be your punishment, so go ahead/I will enjoy destroying your life better than I like orgasming/After me you'll become a woman-hater/ I'll tear out your heart without you even feeling it. A decidedly more menacing twist on the classic Gloria Gaynor "I Will Survive" anthem, Karleusa encourages women to exercise the kind of arbitrary violence Balkan societies usually reserve for men.

Although culturally significant, the videos that challenge the normative gender politics are counterbalanced by performers who continue to play up the cliched versions of Balkan masculinity. For instance, a Serbian performer of Bosnian origin, Dara Bubamara, in her 2013 single "Balkan Man" celebrates "authentic" Balkan masculinity, defining it in terms of assertiveness, dominance, and aggression. The refrain of the song, which has attracted 870,000 views on YouTube, emphasizes her supposed needs: I have no need for flowers/I need a man who plays rough/A typical Balkan guy who can undress me with the corner of his eye/And makes me lose my breath when he looks at me. The lead singer of the Serbian band, Luna, expresses a similar sentiment in affirming a rugged Balkan

masculinity by negatively comparing it to West European gender standards. The lyrics read: You are rarely affectionate/A typical Balkan bloke/But I still pick you over any Spanish guy. A comparative pattern emerges even in videos that place specific Balkan nationalities above foreign ones. The most recent example of this type is a track by the Bosnian Elvira Rahić and DJ Deny. In the clip, Elvira is courted by men hailing from countries more prosperous than Bosnia—from Saudi Arabia to Japan—promising her not only Manolo Blahnik shoes and pearls galore but also a foreign passport. In other words, these men offer two items that are in great demand in the ghettoized Balkans: financial security and international mobility. The video heroine easily dismisses her foreign suitors with the following refrain: “Neither the Dane, nor the German stand a chance/Only my Bosnian loves me.” What exactly the Bosnian suitor offers that the others cannot counter does not become clear, but the popular song (boasting over three million views) resembles the kind of patriotic fodder that dominated the 1990s.

Although contemporary pop-folk remains tethered to traditional forms of Balkan masculinity, the genre has injected the public forum with emancipatory narratives in two ways. First, the fact that the most popular pop-folk artists have depicted the Balkans as Europe’s carefree, decadent, and inclusive playground has clear implications for how Balkan masculinities operate in the postwar, postsocialist space. Pop-folk music shows self-conscious signs of separating itself from nationalistic mythology of the 1990s, which insisted that ethnic exceptionalism define regional masculine identities. Second, pop-folk divas have challenged the stereotypical macho tropes of Balkan masculinity by objectifying and sexualizing the male figure while simultaneously appropriating for

themselves the macho persona. In this sense, pop-folk has shown potential for evolution and the destabilization of normative gender politics.

### The Many Faces of Urban-alternative Music

Despite its notable emancipatory potential, pop-folk is more muted in its sociopolitical critique than urban alternative music, which remains, for most part, in open conflict with traditional identity politics in the West Balkans. Unlike pop-folk, urban alternative music rejects not only the consumerist values and the embourgeoisement of the postwar era but also the widespread corruption and dysfunction of the political apparatus. If pop-folk performers have in the past decade begun to implicitly challenge heteronormativity and the region's divisive ethnic politics, urban alternative bands tackle sociopolitical issues more openly and directly. In terms of its gender politics, however, the various indie genres have contrasting approaches. Rock, punk, ska, and reggae performers most self-consciously reject heterosexism, openly subverting traditional gender and sexuality. Hip-hop and rap artists focus much more heavily on broad sociopolitical issues and rap most consistently about issues related to male urban youth living in working-class ghettos. There are also instances in Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian hip-hop where rappers couch their critique of consumerism and materialism in misogynistic terms, coding them as feminine and/or homosexual. Overall, however, urban alternative music remains at the forefront of reconceptualizing masculine identities in the postwar era by celebrating the complexity of gender

performance—even if the alternative genres are not as popular as their pop-folk counterparts.

Several popular bands radically and consistently rethink essentialized masculinity. For example, several prominent Croatian performers, such as Let 3, Hladno Pivo, The Beat Fleet, and Elemental, systematically subvert nationalistic, militaristic, and traditional patriarchal symbols by parodying them in both song and public performance. Let 3's parodies in particular create laughable and often grotesque caricatures of traditional gender roles. Their portrayal of men is both a celebration of divergent ethnical identities and a strong critique of tribal views of gender. Their shows are notoriously controversial; they often appear in the nude and simulate male same-sex orgies on stage. During one of their shows, one of the extras hung a photo of Croatia's Prime Minister on his erect penis. An album cover of theirs features two of the band members dressed as Catholic bishops with gigantic plaster penises protruding from their ceremonial garb. The album is (fittingly) entitled *Dicking Your Way to God* (Kurcem do vjere). The shock value of their performances is inseparable from their music and their activities, which span the entire former Yugoslavia. Their sizable popularity can be gleaned from their fact that their most successful singles attract anywhere between 250,000 and two million views.

In a similarly direct, but less scandalous manner, Elemental, a hip-hop fusion group from Zagreb, uses a strong female feminist voice to overturn the image of a stereotypical male sexual conqueror by inverting the traditional power roles. In their song *Romantika* (Romance), the lead singer assumes the role of the pursuer while the male protagonists are saddled with the tired tropes of a passive object of desire. The two million

views on YouTube testify to the fact that the song has become a sort of ode to an emancipated femininity in the West Balkans. The Beat Fleet, a hip-hop fusion band, similarly reverses, through mocking, tropes of Balkan hypermasculinity with their with song “Mater” (Mother), which boasts 910,000 views. The male performers sing as lovers scorned, abandoned by their paramour and vow vengeance. The hand of justice, however, belongs to their mothers. They sing: My mother is after you/She knows all the places you go at night/My mother is after you/She knows where you live, although you won’t live for much longer. The dark humor of the song reflects both strong matriarchal traditions of Dalmatia, Croatia’s coastal region, as well as the infantilized masculinity that often masquerades as hypermasculine bravado typical of Mediterranean cultures.

While punk, rock, and hip-hop fusion performers focus more directly on gender issues, West Balkan rappers and “pure,” nonfusion, hip-hop artists concern themselves with both describing the extent, and analyzing the source, of masculine violence in the West Balkans. The biggest hip-hop hits tend to draw a direct link between men’s aggressiveness and state-level corruption and incompetence. They contextualize the exponential level of everyday violence as a result of unemployment, poverty, and a lack of any social safety nets. This, according to many rappers, becomes an ideal setting in which men have little choice but to become criminals. West Balkan rappers see material destitution as a direct cause of young men turning to criminal activity in order to survive or simply vent their anger over their helpless socioeconomic position. Similarly, lyrics of hip-hop performers accentuate that the inability of state institutions to offer meaningful alternatives makes young men particularly vulnerable to

criminal influences, which ironically provide the youth with a sense of direction.

The Croatian band Djecaci unflinchingly reflects on violence as a literal dead end. Their biggest hit “Lovrinac” references the main cemetery in Split, which stands as the ultimate and inevitable destination for criminals of various kinds: “rapists, thieves, Mafiosi, druggys, and pedophiles.” The video, which attracted four million views to date, features the panoply of would-be victims—male and female, strong and infirm, and young and old—as proactive defenders or their bodies and property while the exclusively male victimizers are depicted as bullies whose desire to bring harm is directly inverse to their ability to accomplish their task. This emancipatory narrative strips those who wield brute force of any cultural capital and acts as a cautionary tale for anyone seeking to change their fate through brute force.

If the band Djecaci condemns pathological aggression, Serbian hip-hop artist Marcelo aims to explain, as well as denounce, the roots of masculine violence in Serbia. He raps how a young man Darko easily turned into a compulsive thug, bent on murdering those who are different from him. Marcelo describes Darko as a malnourished kid from a poor family who had been mercilessly bullied by his schoolmates. By the time he turned seventeen, Darko became a tyrant going by the moniker Pegla, that is, Flatiron. Marcelo paints a grim portrait of Flatiron’s psychology: He hates Croats ‘cause he heard he had to in his favorite band’s song/He hates faggots because his church told him to. As Marcelo makes clear, Darko feels he must keep up with mainstream values so he avoids being an outsider. Darko’s point of no return comes when he assaults and murders a passerby because he suspects him of being gay, only to realize that the

stranger had been the only person to have defended him against bullies when he was younger. Despite the fact that Marcelo frames Flatiron's choices around the broader social context, he nonetheless passes a verdict on him, making him liable for his own choices: How come you are now all alone and mute?/How come no one's by your side?/Only bits of someone else's flesh stain your palm, your forehead, and your soul—which is no longer there. But, ultimately, Marcelo stresses the fact that the broader society should take responsibility for the Frankensteins they bring to life.

Although the dominant trends in hip-hop and rap have been largely emancipatory, certain rappers, such as Serbia's Struka or Croatia's Stoka, have built their public and artistic personas on conspicuous consumption and sexual promiscuity. Like certain US performers, representatives of West Balkan hip-hop elevate hypermasculinity, misogyny, and homophobia as desirable traits in men (Armstrong 2001, 2004; Adams and Fuller 2006; Oware 2011). Struka, for instance, has written a song in two sequels entitled "Whores." In these two songs, he denounces and slanders the female sex drive while loudly proclaiming his own. He begins the second sequel by saying he has had plenty of respect for "good girls," but is rapping to disparage the "whoring" type that ostensibly uses him for money. In lurid and graphic detail, Struka lists the many ways in which he sexually and physically demeans women who are "easy" and sell themselves to gain access to his wealth. According to Struka's credo, men have the right to regulate women's sexuality and humiliate those whose sexuality is not in line with traditional standards. Similarly, Stoka, in his single "My girlfriend has a boyfriend," exacts punishment on the men whom Stoka's girlfriend chose as lovers, thus establishing uncontested ownership over his paramour through violence.

Despite clear-cut examples of misogyny and a lack of interest in examining men's problems outside the young, urban, and working-class male youth, hip-hop and rap are nevertheless showing tentative signs of further evolution. In 2012, Serbian artist by the name of Damjan Losić has come out with his debut single "Don't touch the faggots" (Ne diraj mi fegete) as an openly gay man. The song, which has caused a moderate stir in Serbian society, represents a kind of emancipation manifesto in which Damjan Losić affirms his same-sex gender attraction in strictly positive tones. Symbolic is the fact that Karleusa, one of Serbia's most celebrated pop-folk divas and a vocal defender of LGBT rights, has expressed an interest in collaborating with the country's first gay hip-hop performer. In that sense, it is clear that pop-folk and hip-hop can, and increasingly will, overlap despite contrasting genre specifications.

## Macho Cinema

Since the late 1990s, a notable strand of Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian film has billed itself as discrediting all kinds of hostile prejudice—and was recognized as such on the international film circuit. Many Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian dramas filmed since 1998 have functioned as cautionary tales about how violence of any type leads to a moral demise or death or both. In many ways, postwar Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian film has become centered on the question of masculine identity and its relationship to violence. In fact, West Balkan cinema has focused so much on male criminality since the late 1990s that it deserves the moniker "macho cinema."<sup>8</sup> Yet, despite being celebrated internationally for its clear moral stance and its rejection of any type of aggression, post-1998

Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian cinematography has, in an ironic twist, valorized, and romanticized the trope of violent masculinity. By utilizing the archetype of the abusive but justifiably enraged macho vigilante, West Balkan filmmakers create a paradox: they maintain that it is impossible to construct a masculine community on the basis of vigilante justice while simultaneously glamorizing violence as a path to cathartic self-realization. Put simply, these films and their creators are chauvinistic despite themselves.

Film critic Jurica Pavicic' argues that postwar cinema has turned a corner from depicting an Orientalized Balkan masculinity, calling West Balkan film created after 2000 the "cinema of normalization." We, however, would argue that depictions of men have not yet been normalized sufficiently to merit this diagnosis. Unlike Pavicic', we do not see the heroes of film made after 1998 as taking an active attitude to problems, engaging themselves in problem solving, or trying to sort out a better future for themselves (2010, 47). In our view, male characters are still too often portrayed more as victims of circumstance rather than proactive agents in control of their own fate. We contend that even as West Balkan filmmakers attempt selfconsciously to destabilize patriarchy and heteronormative frameworks, they do not hold violent men directly accountable. Even when directors "murder" their miscreant protagonists, their death does not unambiguously suggest a life wasted but a life lived to the fullest. Culture critic Ivana Kronja's observation about violence in Serbian cinema of the 1990s holds true for today's West Balkan cinematic narratives: "They take the overwhelming violence to be the main cause of psychological frustration for the male hero, which provokes his own violent reaction and therefore establishes a never-ending cycle of

violence.” (2006, 18). West Balkan celluloid protagonists consistently and predictably “correct” injustice with violence, usually perishing in the process but also asserting their independence. Masculine violence in this context emerges as a form of mental and emotional self-defense against a hostile world.

When filmmakers do not blame society’s internal degeneracy for the excesses of masculine violence, they often point fingers at the older generation.<sup>9</sup> The directors often cast fathers as being either too corrupt or too weak to stand up to the immoralities of those in power; fathers teach their offspring how to either sell out or try to dominate the system by mistreating others. In other words, fathers stand in for the dishonest society their sons are expected to endure. Suffering indignities in and out of the home, the male progeny eventually becomes violent in order to depose the father figure and establish their independence. The antiheroes of macho cinema thus come to be driven by a principled resistance; they struggle against the twin evils of a morally stagnant society and a morally flawed legacy of their fathers. The directors of macho cinema seem to want it both ways; they want to discredit violence as a way to solve problems while validating men who instinctively attack moral corruption with brawn.

Of the three national cinemas, the Serbian one has the most consistent track record of demonstrating how mindless violence has corrupted the entire social fabric. Perhaps the earliest instance of this fascination was a journalistic expose that quickly turned into a short documentary film *See You in the Obituary* (Vidimo se u citulji). This 1994 thirty-five-minute documentary gave a glimpse into the widespread criminality in Milosevic’s Serbia. In front of cameras, hardened mobsters openly reflect

on their underground activities and demonstrate that they understand that their lives would have a very short shelf life. These kamikaze figures flaunted norms when the rest of society sheepishly lived out its dull, gray, monotonous existence. In a nod to the idea of an urban jungle, the men of the Serbian underground came to be known as “the samurai of the hot asphalt” (zestoki momci s vruceg asfalta). These urban thugs, rather than military men in fatigues, were the quintessential heroes of the Serbian 1990s.

The embodiment of this masculine ideal was Aleksandar “Knele” Knezevic’, who was one of Serbia’s most famous gangsters. When he died, even the Washington Post described his funeral and the mourning that accompanied his death; the reporter described him as “nice-looking, well-groomed gangster, just 21 years old, tall, with rippling muscles and lots of money.” The piece even waxed lyrical about the manner of his death: “After he was found dead in his hotel room late last month with two bullets in his head, three in his chest and \$3,200 worth of German marks in his pants, his associates organized a funeral befitting a national hero.” Knele, who lived by the motto, “Better to live one day as a lion than a lifetime as a mouse,” received a hero’s funeral. His “brothers” banned music in all of Belgrade’s clubs on the Friday following his murder. Moreover, “restaurants that had paid protection money to Knezevic’s gang placed hundreds of mourning notices in the local papers. More than twenty women also bought memorial ads, each proclaiming that she was Knele’s one true love” (Harden 1992). Given that Serbian-style gangsterism had become the country’s calling card, it is no surprise that filmmakers found inspiration in the men who defined an entire era. By the

beginning of the following century, this trend will have spilled over into neighboring Bosnia and Croatia.

The film that captured Knele's pathos and defined the visual trope of urban criminality was Srđan Dragojević's (1998) film *Wounds*. *Wounds* insightfully dissects the psychosis that takes hold of Pinki and Svaba (Kraut), two frustrated, embittered, and anxious young men who decide to take control of their rudderless lives and enter the criminal underground at the tender age of sixteen. Seeing the powerlessness of their elders—especially their hapless fathers—the young men fill the moral vacuum by adopting the laws of the concrete jungle. *Wounds* is chock-full of brief maxims to help one understand how mastering the dark criminal underworld of Belgrade ensured national infamy. One such dictum speaks volumes about the macho culture of the Balkans: "Fuck or be fucked. There is no third way." They, like, Knele, prefer to live boldly even if it means dying young.

Dragojević made this film with the explicit desire to have the viewer identify positively with the two antiheroes. He openly frames his narrative in terms of a justified vendetta: "This is a story about young criminals whom we believe have a deep moral right to be violent, even to murder, despite the political unacceptability of this idea. An insensitive society and a totalitarian Serbian regime have made thousands of Serbian teenagers dangerous, senseless killing machines, ironically whose main victims are themselves." He goes on to justify his characters'—and their peers'—righteous wrath: "It is quite all right for them to rob and steal and they should bust into the houses of those businessmen, politicians and ministers that have become rich during the war, because they have their sneakers, their first trips abroad, summer vacations that these kids never

had, nor will ever have'' (Dragojević 1998). This message resonated with broad swaths of the Serbian populace: *Wounds* sold 450,000 tickets, making it Serbia's top-selling film of 1998. Even more impressive is the fact that *Wounds* managed a similar kind of feat in Croatia, becoming the first, and most popular, Serbian film shown in Croatia since the end of the Croatian War of Independence in 1995. The dynamic visuals and captivating narrative also earned the film a place at the Berlin, Sundance, and Toronto film festivals.

Beyond its immediate success, the effect of *Wounds* continues to be felt in Serbian cinema. After 1998, the trope of disillusioned youth that turns to violence in order to find some semblance of meaning and purpose has remained a constant. Even after the 1990s gangster culture had ceased to dominate Belgrade and its environs, Serbian directors keep returning to this compelling narrative in films such as *Absolute 100* (*Apsolutnih Sto*), dir. Srđan Golubić, 2001; *1 on 1* (*1 na 1*), dir. Mladen Maticević, 2002; *Skinning* (*Sisanje*), dir. Stevan Filipović, 2010; *Tilva Ros*, dir. Nikola Lezaić, 2010; and *The Whirl* (*Vir*), dir. Bojan Vuk Kosovcević, 2012. One of the most recent instances of this trend is the acclaimed 2010 film *Skinning*. Part exploration of the Serbian neo-Nazi movement and part testimony of youth criminality in post-Milosević Serbia, *Skinning* explores how an intellectually gifted, middle-class kid with a penchant for mathematics becomes not only involved with a racist youth group but also comes to lead it. There seem to be plenty of reasons for Nević's conversion: the lack of parental care (dead mother and an emotionally absent father), no meaningful life direction (math seems more of a hobby than a passion), and no attachment to a set of ideals. His turn toward Nazism thus appears to be, as it was with Pinki and Svaba, an attempt to

find a sense of clarity and direction in an otherwise aimless existence. His conversion also automatically gains him an elevated social status, access to the main players in Serbia's corrupt political life, and the sense that he is, in a very real way, running not only his own life, but also leading others.

The director of *Skinning*, Stevan Filipovic', clearly aimed to make Neveca an odious character. We see him murder a defenseless Roma youth by smashing his skull with a rock; he is shown masterminding a brutal destruction of a Roma makeshift habitat; he violently breaks the nose of his mentor by kicking his face with his steel toe boot. All these scenes do not hold punches and are filmed in gruesome and sickening detail. Even for an audience accustomed to scenes of violence, the brutality committed by Neveca is unmediated, personal, and gut-wrenching. And yet, despite the fact that these crimes unambiguously accentuate how far Neveca has sunk, at the end of the film Neveca ironically emerges as an honest, if not likable, character.

Compared to the politicians and law enforcers who control various hooligan groups for their own cynical purposes, it seems that Neveca is, above all else, committed to solving societal ills by cleansing the "undesirable social elements." Although his hate-filled ideals provide him with an access to status and influence, he remains more dedicated to the movement's principles than the rewards themselves. In fact, it is Neveca's idealism that the political and law-enforcement authorities find so threatening. Because of this, they frame him for a murder and warn him that should he choose to not cooperate, they would lock him up and immediately find a more accommodating replacement. Neveca thus ends up being the victim of cynical and manipulative regime which, instead of helping him find a better way of life, commits him to a life of crime. Here

Filipovic' unambiguously echoes Dragojevic''s defense of the two protagonists in *Wounds*: "An insensitive society and a totalitarian Serbian regime have made thousands of Serbian teenagers dangerous, senseless killing machines, ironically whose main victims are themselves." The sins of the fathers are thus visited upon the sons and the sons emerge as at least idealistic, if not ideal, protagonists. Film critic Marija Grujic' accurately diagnoses the impression *Neveca* makes on domestic audiences: "The young nationalist extremist (and murderer) is represented as an understandable element of Serbian society, like someone who is less evil and more honest than others. The violent aggressor is shown as someone who is relatable" (2012, 84). Ultimately, Filipovic' does not hold *Neveca* fully accountable; he is first a victim of his lost childhood and then of corrupt politicians; his crimes are not entirely his own.

Macho cinema, as defined by films such as *Wounds* and *Skinning*, has been less prevalent in Bosnia since the country's film industry revived after 2001. Nonetheless, both Serbian and Bosnian film industries have taken a highly critical stance toward postwar developments. Scholars Tomasz Rawski and Katarzyna Roman accurately characterize the key traits of contemporary Bosnian cinema in the following manner: "The characters are forced to face the fragile present that is irrevocably devoid of stable reference points, such as permanent jobs, decent housing conditions or wages high enough to survive the next month. Living in a constant danger of loss limits their existence to the fight for economic survival" (2014, 194). Even more key in their estimation is the fact that postwar Bosnian directors are more interested in stories of survival strategies than goals, dreams, and aspirations; native filmmakers have

been critical of the regime and society but have largely advanced escapism as a way to deal with the country's sociopolitical issues.

Srdan Vuletic's (2004) feature film *Summer in the Golden Valley* (Ljeto u zlatnoj dolini) epitomizes the survivalist attitude in postwar Bosnian film. In making a film about a male sixteen-year-old abducting a young girl in order to pay off his late father's debt, Vuletic had a very clear mission statement in mind; he commented: "This movie reflects on the moment when we, the sons, have to decide whether we will rectify the mistakes of our fathers or simply tell them to fuck off. I choose the latter." Like Pinki, Svaba, and Nevica, the protagonist of Vuletic's film has been left high and dry to fend for himself. Not only does Vuletic condemn the previous generation of men for abandoning their offspring, but also blames them for ruining their lives from the get-go: "I belong to a generation of sons who got stuck with obliterated cities, collapsed principles, and the chaos of a destroyed society; all of this was an inheritance from our fathers. In short, a generation of sons have become hostages of bad decisions made in the past by someone else" (Vuletic 2004).

Vuletic dramatizes and embodies the father-son struggle by focusing on the Sarajevan sixteen-year-old, Fikret Varupa, who, like Svaba, Pinki, and Nevica, is quite ordinary at the outset of the narrative. This all changes when Fikret's father Sabahudin dies. At Sabahudin's funeral, a stranger by the name of Hamid insists that Fikret's father had owed him 48,236 German marks, a small fortune in povertystricken Bosnia. Since debt carries great shame in Muslim tradition, Fikret is obligated to return the borrowed sum and restore the family's honor. Since there are no honest ways to obtain that kind of money, Fikret is essentially forced to enter the criminal underground. In a paradoxical twist, the man who facilitates

Fikret's entry into Sarajevo's criminal underbelly is the policeman Ramiz. The "defender of public order" decides to "help" Fikret by involving him in the kidnapping of a rich businessman's daughter. Fikret proves himself to be an apt pupil and in short order becomes a capable lawbreaker. At the end of the film, however, the director restores Fikret's internal decency as he frees the girl from potential harm. He eventually gathers the necessary money only to find out that Hamid had actually deceived him; there had never been any debt.

Like in *Wounds and Skinning*, the paternal figures are void of an internal moral compass. In this way, Vuletic' condemns the generation that came before while simultaneously exculpating his young protagonist. He judges the fathers harshly and rejects their legacy, demanding that the current generation of men start from scratch; to follow the fathers means to go down the road of certain self-destruction. Even Fikret's completely absent father casts a long shadow over Fikret's life. The invented debt played such a negative role in Fikret's formative years because Sabahudin apparently shared very little with his son; the lack of meaningful communication on Sabahudin's part had led Fikret to accept Hamid's word and then led him to Ramiz. Fikret embraces violence to correct a perceived injustice; at the same time, he is not held accountable for the violence he commits since he had been pushed into it by naivete', ignorance, and immoral elders.

Like their Bosnian counterparts, Croatian filmmakers began turning to the darker side of national life in the early 2000s, soon after Franjo Tudman's death in 1999. Arguably, no movie had a more shocking and widespread effect on Croatian audiences than Branko Schmidt's 2009 film *Metastases*. The story itself had become a sensation in 2006 when it came out as a book that told the story of four maladjusted friends from a Zagreb

suburb. The narrative about a group of men in their twenties and thirties, deeply entrenched in a racist, alcoholic, junkie, and football fan culture of Zagreb struck a cord in Croatian society as a reflection of its collective psyche. The group's dysfunctionality is painfully obvious: Filip is a recovering drug addict who returns to the old gang after rehab and finds himself incapable of integrating into "normal" society; Krpa is a sociopathic veteran who regularly beats his wife inches of her life; Dejo is a drug addict plagued by his Serbian heritage; and Kizo is a weak-minded chronic alcoholic. Aside from addictions, a shared neighborhood, and sheer inertia, nothing ties these men together. Advertised and billed as the Croatian version of *Trainspotting*, the film aims to cast a light on issues the entire society wants to brush under the rug.

Through the stories of these four childhood friends, Schmidt elicits images of an unstoppable moral cancer plaguing modern-day Croatia and its metropolis. Maturing in the wake of war, the young men reflect the petty hatreds, violence, prejudices, and ennui hanging over the country like a disease that spreads with no cure in sight. There is plenty of action in the film, but none of it productive or positive; the protagonists' activities only ensure more of the same the following day. The four steal, deal drugs, beat each other and the women in their lives, all the while talking about little else than booze and soccer scores.

While Schmidt seems to straightforwardly condemn his protagonists as misguided at best and irredeemable at worst, they seem genuine and alive compared with their surroundings. In fact, the film makes it seem as if the men are reflections of their sterile but intolerant environment. It appears that these young men are reacting to the postwar gentrified sterility; the respectable citizens of Zagreb alternate between ignoring the hooligans

and cowering in fear when faced with their senseless rage. As rebels without a cause or ideology, they cannot be bought and act out their rage by destroying either their surroundings or themselves. This message comes through clearly as we watch the group's chronic alcoholic die from alcohol poisoning and as the drug addicts frame their own family members for a drug heist. Thus, Schmidt both asks the audience to reject the protagonists as demented while at the same time coding them as authentic compared to their cowardly petite bourgeois surroundings.

In his review of *Metastases*, Croatian film critic Zeljko Luketic' observes that the film missed its goal since the very hooligans whom the movie was supposed to shame actually gave the film two thumbs up; they felt it was an authentic reflection of their lives. Luketic' goes even further to argue that the film proved so popular because the hooligans depicted in the film "only do those things that the silent majority fantasizes about in private. Instead, however, their children do the very things they not dare to do: beat up women and faggots, hate Serbs, drink beer, fart, fight in the name of their soccer teams, and destroy public property" (Luketic' 2009). In other words, Schmidt documents rather than mortifies. A Croatian actor Kristijan Ugrina, who participated in the making of the film, dismissed the accusation that the movie represented Zagreb's soccer fans in a negative light by noting: "They can only complain about that fact that we treated them with kid gloves, you might even say with a dose of romanticism" (Levaj 2009). Thus, even the makers of the film wished to soften the edge of their criticism.

Although culturally dominant, macho cinema has, since 2005, been accompanied by a parallel trend of films which have focused on "winning losers." In the past decade, there has been an increase in comedies and

quietly ironic dramas that focus on men the world bypasses. This newer tendency, evident particularly in Bosnian and Croatian cinema, has produced narratives about simpatico underdogs who win the day (and sometimes the girl).<sup>10</sup> Although the comedic genre endows these Woody Allenesque types with a high degree of likability, they have not yet become cultural icons to emulate, even ironically. It is yet too early to tell whether the “victorious little guy” trope will gain traction in the coming years. For now, macho cinema continues to unite the region in terms of its preoccupation with, and tacit glorification of, violent masculinity.

## Conclusion

Long seen and invoked as an exception to the largely peaceful processes of post1989 democratization in Eastern Europe, the states of former Yugoslavia have been studied in isolation from other East European countries also transitioning from socialism to capitalism and democracy. Because of the Yugoslav Wars of Succession and their legacy, the historical and sociopolitical conditions of West Balkan societies were seen as a world apart—at times literally so. Rather than interpret the Balkans as somehow uniquely traditional and its masculine constructs as unequivocally antimodern, we reflect on the evolution of postsocialist masculine constructs as a historically and sociologically vernacular process that is profoundly and excitingly paradoxical. This process of localized globalization produces a kind of hybrid masculinity that is defined by both patriarchal dynamics and elements resistant to it. The investigation of the most popular musical and cinematic productions in Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia shows that masculine models that circulate widely in the public

forum embody a cultural paradox. On the one hand, these models support binary gender frameworks. On the other hand, they advance alternative gender models that undermine the legitimacy of traditional modes of representing and performing masculinity.

Pop-folk, the seemingly most quintessential expression of exclusivist and traditional values in the West Balkans, has, ironically, illuminated the potential of the West Balkans as becoming a depoliticized and inclusive space (Velickovic´ 2013). Although pop-folk's appeal still rests firmly on hypersexualization and commercial homogenization of gendered identities, its strides toward depoliticization and ethnoneutrality, as well as toleration of ambiguity in the artists' gender performance, nonetheless opens up possibilities for multiple male subjectivities. Urban alternative music much more directly renounces heteronormative and static gender models, especially when it comes to young, urban, and working-class masculinity. At the same time, urban alternative genres do not have as firm a grip on the national mind-set as their pop-folk counterparts, partially because their focus remains on young and urban audiences.

Much like musical production, the cinematic output is at a crossroads; it both rejects rigid masculine roles but does so in ways that unintentionally popularizes and reinscribes them into national consciousness. Although much more self-conscious about promoting a vision of an inclusive and tolerant society through endorsing cautionary tales about the pitfalls of a violent masculinity, West Balkan cinema still lionizes men who resort to violence to fight injustice.

It is still too early to tell whether the traditional modes of masculinity will allow for a further multiplication of male subjectivities since the region, like Europe itself, is undergoing economic uncertainties—a

situation that usually facilitates a proliferation of more normative gender roles. Nonetheless, the presence of non-normative masculine models indicates that the West Balkans are not a microcosm apart; rather, the region is a part of a larger transitional process in which patriarchal masculine modes slowly give way to multiple gendered subjectivities.

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#### Notes

1. European Union institutions define the “West Balkans” as Albania and the constituent republics of former Yugoslavia, minus Slovenia. For the purposes of this essay, however, West Balkans will serve as shorthand for referring to Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia.
2. Michael Kimmel correctly points out that “men’s violence represents one of the most massive global social problems.” Therefore, the study of West Balkan masculinities has a decidedly important and specific role to play in delineating the varied aspects of globalized patriarchal violence (Kimmel 2001, 246).
3. This shift is meaningful since many of the former Yugoslav republics—Croatia in particular—sought to create distinct cultural identity for themselves by equating turbo-folk with the particularities of Serbian life (Baker 2008).

4. YouTube channel PatriotskePesmeSRB (PatriotSongsSRB, Serbia) contains 4,060 songs, Plibih (Bosnian) has 308, while channel Pjesme iz Domovinskog rata (Songs from Homeland War, Croatia) contains 19.
5. The most popular songs have nearly one million hits on YouTube, while other manage between 50,000 and 100,000.
6. The most celebrated performers are Adnan Zenunovic', Salem Kapetanovic', Rizo Hamidovic', Nazif Gljiva, Sateliti, and Raspjevane Meraklije.
7. Eurovision (2014b) also points out that so many Serbian music videos might have a distinctly queer aesthetic because the most successful music video producer—Dejan Milic'evic'—is an openly gay man.
8. In this grouping, we include films such as Wounds (Rane), dir. Srdan Dragojevic' (1998), Absolute 100 (Apsolutnih Sto), dir. Srdan Golubic' (2001), 1 on 1 (1 na 1), dir. Mladen Matic'evic' (2002), Summer in the Golden Valley (Ljeto u Zlatnoj Dolini), dir. Srdan Vuletic' (2003), A Wonderful Night in Split (Ta Divna Splitska Noc'), dir. Arsen Ostojic' (2004), Metastases (Metastaze) Branko Schmidt (2009), Skinning (S'is'anje), dir. Stevan Filipovic' (2010), Tilva Ros', dir. Nikola Lezaic', 2010, The Whirl (Vir), dir. Bojan Vuk Kosovc'evic' (2012), Cannibal Vegetarian (Ljudoz'der Vegetarijanac), dir. Branko Schmidt (2012), Darkness (Tmina), Luka Bursac' (2014).
9. The films that reflect negatively on the role fathers play in the life of their progeny and social environment more broadly include Sorry for Kung Fu (Oprosti za Kung Fu), dir. Ognjen Svilicic' (2004), Armin, dir. Ognjen Svilicic' (2007), No One's Son (Niciji Sin), dir. Arsen Ostojic' (2008), Just Between Us (Neka Ostone Med'u Nama), dir. Rajko Grljic' (2010), A Letter To My Father (Pismo Caci), dir. Damir Cucic' (2012), Donkey (Kenjac), dir. Antonio Nuic' (2009), No One's Child (Nicije Dete), dir. Vuk Rsumovic' (2014).

10. Films we include in this category are *Love Life of a Gentle Coward* (Ljubavni Zivot Domobrana), dir. Pavo Marinkovic´ (2009), *72 Days* (72 Dana), dir. Danilo Serbedzija 2010, *Cowboys* (Kauboji), dir. Tomislav Mrsic´ (2013), *Woman With a Broken Nose* (Zena Sa Slomljenim Nosem), dir. Srdan Koljevic´ (2010), *Guardians of the Night* (Cuvari Noci), dir. Namik Kabil (2008), *It's Hard to Be Nice* (Tesko je Biti Fin), dir. Srdan Vuletic´ (2008), *Love and Other Crimes* (Ljubav i Drugi Zlocini), dir. Stefan Arsenijevic´ (2007), *Monument to Michael Jackson* (Spomenik Majklu Dzeksonu), dir. Darko Longulov (2014).

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