

Balkan Express 2021 – Conference Report

The 6th International and Interdisciplinary Balkan Studies Conference

Balkan Express 2021: Neighbors and neighborhood in the Balkans

Date: November 12-13, 2021

Location: Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague

Organizing committee: PhDr. Dana Bittnerová, CSc., PhDr. Mirjam Moravcová, DrSc., Mgr. Ivana Skenderija, Mgr. Markéta Slavková, Ph.D., František Šístek, M.A., Ph.D.

Institutional Support:

Faculty of Humanities – Charles University

Institute of History of the Czech Academy of Sciences

Institute of Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences

Institute of International Studies of the Faculty of Social Sciences – Charles University

Czech Association for Slavic, Balkan and Byzantine Studies

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The Balkan Express Conferences, organized since 2013, are the largest conferences in Balkan Studies held on a regular basis in the Czech Republic.

In 2021, the 6th international and interdisciplinary conference Balkan Express approached the Balkan past and present through concepts and ideas of neighbors, neighborhood and neighborly relations. The central role of the notion of neighborhood (komšilik) in the daily lives of people in the Balkans and the importance of neighborly relations in Balkan societies in general seems to be beyond doubt. The traditional Balkan notion of neighborhood, formed under Ottoman and Mediterranean social and cultural influences, tends to be conceptualized in an inclusive manner, emphasizing the special relations, respect and mutual assistance among close neighbors regardless of their faith and ethnicity. However, the Balkans are also frequently represented as a region characterized by deep and long-lasting mutual animosity and repetitive violence among neighbors. Neighborhood is thus represented as a breeding ground of distrust, jealousy, hatred and conflict.

The conference “Balkan Express 2021: Neighbors and neighborhood in the Balkans” took place on November 12-13, 2021 in the new building of the Faculty of Humanities of Charles University in Prague - Trója. There were altogether 9 thematic panels with 22 academic presentations (30 minutes per presentation) prepared by 25 participants from the Czech Republic,

USA, Slovenia, Poland, Kosovo, Serbia, Greece, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Belgium, Germany, Austria, United Kingdom, Croatia and Montenegro. The presenters included distinguished senior scholars and noted junior scholars as well as students presenting their latest research results. The conference was organized as a hybrid event. In addition to participants and conference guests present in Prague in person, several dozen scholars, students and other online participants from Europe and North America followed the conference program on Zoom and took active part in discussions. One of the founders of the Balkan Express conferences, Dr. Mirjam Moravcová, our dear colleague and doyen of Czech ethnology who celebrated her 90th birthday in March 2021, was also among them.

Apart from classic academic presentations, the program also included the first public presentation of the collective volume *Imagining Bosnian Muslims in Central Europe*, edited by František Šístek (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books 2021), attended by several co-authors of the book and the first public screening of the ethnographic film *M.I.R.* by anthropologist Markéta Slavková and documentarist Viola Tokárová. The film provided an insight into everyday lives and perspectives of four men of Bosnian Muslim origin, their family members and friends living in post-war Srebrenica.

The first day of the conference was followed by a live concert of the Prague group *Džezvica*, inspired by the music of the Balkans, on the premises of the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University. On the second day, the accompanying cultural program took place at Opletalova street near Prague's central Wenceslas Square at *Lastavica – Association for the citizens of former Yugoslavia*, organization promoting tolerance, multicultural understanding, and cultivation of links and exchanges between the countries of former Yugoslavia and the Czech Republic. The evening program included author readings and discussions with two well-known contemporary authors from Bosnia and Herzegovina: writer and current ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Czech Republic H.E. Martina Mlinarević and writer Faruk Šehić. This part of the program was realized with the help and cooperation of the Embassy of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Prague. Discussions on literary matters as well as contemporary politics were followed by the opening of an exhibition *When the neighbors were real human beings*, prepared and presented by historian Elijas Tauber from Sarajevo. The exhibition focused on the destinies of persecuted Jews in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Second World War whose lives were saved thanks to the solidarity and friendship of their non-Jewish neighbors.

František Šístek and Markéta Slavková

on behalf of the organizing committee of the Balkan Express Conferences

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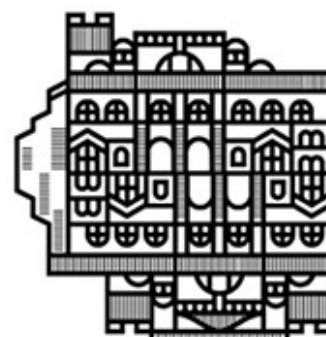
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