

# Diaspora organizations, imagined communities and the versatility of diaspora: The case of Former Yugoslav organizations in the Netherlands

*European Journal of Cultural Studies*

2015, Vol. 18(1) 70–85

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DOI: 10.1177/1367549414557803

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**Abstract**

This article takes the case of Former Yugoslav organizations in the Netherlands to investigate how diaspora organizations are central in constructing identities. Contributing to the growing field of studies about Former Yugoslav diasporas, it explores how diaspora organizations play a role as cultural mediators. Drawing from theories of diaspora, imagined communities and transnationalism, we employ 'diaspora' as a versatile tool of analysis, investigating dimensions of diasporic experience, discourse and practice. Data were gathered through a qualitative study including 25 expert interviews and ethnographic observations. The study indicates that there are two types of diaspora organizations, which are labelled 'exclusive' and 'mixed' diaspora organizations, and that there are notable differences between Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian organizations. Organizations are discussed with regard to their aims, activities and discourses about diaspora and their capacity to forge belongings among communities.

**Keywords**

Community, culture, diaspora, ethnicity, former Yugoslavia, identity, immigration, memory, organizations, the Netherlands

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## Introduction

In an ever-globalizing world, diasporic dwelling is a reality for a growing number of people. Diaspora organizations are particularly interesting in this context, given their multiple roles as mediators between locations, people and institutions. According to Ghorashi (2004), diaspora organizations serve as safety nets, acting as intermediary bodies between individuals and states and playing an essential role in new forms of identity and belonging as experienced among diasporas. Hitherto studies have focused on diaspora and immigrant organizations in relation to participation and integration in host societies (Schrover and Vermeulen, 2005), issues of conflict resolution (Orjuela, 2008; Shain, 2002) and poverty reduction and economic development in homelands (Brinkerhoff, 2011; Newland and Patrick, 2004). In media and cultural studies, diaspora organizations have received limited attention, usually in specific case studies (see, for example, Georgiou's (2001) article on media consumption at the Cypriot Community Centre in London). Dynamics of identity construction, self-representation and community building in diaspora organizations are still largely understudied.

The enlargement of the European Union (EU) with East European countries, from 2004 onwards, has sparked interest in East–West European migration. There has been a growth of studies on the re-imaginings of 'Europe' and East–West relations (Light and Young, 2009) as well as on 'new' migrants, especially guest workers from Poland, Bulgaria and Romania (Engbersen et al., 2013; Rabikowska, 2010). Seeking to contribute to this growing field of research, we focus on migration from the Former Yugoslav countries Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia as it forms a significant, yet under-explored migration flow. Former Yugoslav communities in the Netherlands consist of different groups of migrants and their descendants, mainly labour migrants who arrived in the 1960s and 1970s, and war refugees who arrived in the late 1980s and 1990s. Besides, there is a smaller, but growing, group that migrated for family reasons. All these groups arrived at different moments in time and therefore constitute different 'generations' with various migration motives and paths. Before the ethnic tensions in Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, the Yugoslav immigrants in the Netherlands numbered approximately 28,000 (Sittrop, 1996). Due to these tensions, which quickly developed into the Yugoslav Wars, a large number, particularly Bosnians, fled their country between 1991 and 1995. The Netherlands was an attractive destination because pre-existing networks of migrant workers were available to support thousands of refugees coming to the Netherlands during and after the war (Al-Ali, Black and Koser, 2001). Today, the Netherlands is home to an estimated group of 80,000 people with roots in one of the Former Yugoslav countries.<sup>1</sup> The term 'Yugoslav' embraces many ethnicities and nationalities such as Macedonians, Serbians, Bosnians, Kosovars and Serbs. 'Former Yugoslav' is used here to refer to the three largest migrant groups of Former Yugoslavia in the Netherlands: Bosnian Muslims, Serbian Orthodox Christians and Croatian Catholics.<sup>2</sup> Along with the incoming migrants, many organizations arose. With the first wave of migration (in the 1960s and 1970s) primarily Yugoslav organizations were formed, while in the second wave Croatian, Bosnian and Serbian organizations arose. The question is whether and how Former Yugoslav organizations contribute to shaping collective senses of belonging. Which roles do they play in shaping identity

formations in the different communities? These questions will be investigated as we explore the practices, self-representations and discourses of Former Yugoslav organizations in the Netherlands. First, we will outline the relation between organizations, communities and identities. Then, we will explore the concept of diaspora as a useful and versatile tool for analysis. Subsequently, we will move to the empirical sections, which include a description of our methodology and the results of the study. In the conclusion, finally, we will demonstrate how this study may contribute to the theorization of diaspora and diaspora organizations.

## Diaspora organizations, communities and identities

Migration is considered as a destabilizing experience because it shuffles the dialectics between different axes of belonging. Indeed migration is as much physical as it is symbolic: migrants do not only leave their houses – they leave their homes. Diaspora organizations can function as stable elements within that destabilizing experience, offering opportunities for identification (Ghorashi, 2004). As Georgiou (2001) demonstrated in her study on media consumption in the Cypriot Community Centre in North London, a diaspora organization (also a *physical* place in this case) plays a significant role in the everyday construction of ethnic identities. This makes them particularly interesting for the field of cultural studies.

A useful theoretical starting point to explore the relation between diaspora organizations, communities and identities is Anderson's (1991) seminal conceptualization of nations as 'imagined communities'. The concept can be applied to the constructed nature of diasporas. In Anderson's theory, members of a nation, while not knowing each other personally, have a common understanding of their community. Novels, newspapers and other cultural products offer citizens shared experiences and allow them to understand themselves as members of the same community. In a similar vein, many authors agree that media technologies are crucial factors in the reproduction and transformation of diasporic identities (see Tsagarousianou, 2004: 52).<sup>3</sup> In this light, diasporic identities are 'imagined', and diasporas constitute 'imagined communities' in which the sense of belonging is socially constructed on the basis of an imagined and symbolic common origin and mythic past.

Feelings of cultural belonging develop at the intersection of time and place: they are embedded in the interaction between constructions of past, present and future (Hall, 1990) and here and there (Morley, 2001). The past crystallizes through memories, which is related to the imagined 'We', the imagined 'Other' and to common myths of roots and routes (Clifford, 1994). Memory, both individual and collective, connects the present with the past in so-called 'performances of memory': it brings up the past in the present, in both private and public contexts (Kuhn, 2010). Imagined communities are not only related to the past but also to the future, to 'where we are going'. This future outlook has to do with the reproduction and renewal of community (Georgiou, 2006: 51). In the hope for a collective future, the sense of community strengthens. In addition, the 'common outlook' aspect of identity construction of individuals and the communities they construct has an activist element to it, as strengthening a community might support its political presence. Diaspora organizations represent the ability to transform largely virtual

imagined communities into more tangible communities of practice, as they gather participants around shared activities (e.g. celebrations, commemorations, festivals, manifestations) or shared places (e.g. community centres). Thus, we need to consider not only the symbolic significance of diaspora organizations as they forge identity constructions but also their impact on physical, tangible togetherness among actual groups of people.

## Diaspora as a versatile tool for analysis

A link between organizations and imagined communities may be found in the concept of diaspora. While terms such as ‘migrant’ or ‘refugee’ relate to individuals, ‘diaspora’ entails collectivity and group identity (Brubaker, 2005: 4), and it points at the role of networks, and thus also structured networks or organizations. Nevertheless, diaspora is a heavily contested concept. Brubaker (2005) poignantly refers to the ‘diaspora’ diaspora: ‘a dispersion of the meanings of the term in semantic, conceptual and disciplinary space’ (p. 1). Clifford (1994), some 10 years before, revealed the essence of discussions around diaspora by pointing at the slippages of the term in a disclaimer for his own theorization of diasporas:

There is some slippage in the text between invocations of diaspora theories, diasporic discourses, and distinct historical experiences of diaspora. These are not, of course, equivalent. But in practice it has not always been possible to keep them clearly separate, especially since I am discussing a kind of ‘theorizing’ that is always embedded in particular maps and histories. (p. 302)

Its status as heavily contested, ironically, makes the concept a versatile tool for analysis. It may be employed to allude to *experiences*, *discourses* and *practices*, and the inter-relations between them. To further explain this, we sketch out how thoughts about diaspora have changed over time.

The term diaspora finds its origins in the Greek words *speiro* (‘to sow’) and *dia* (‘across’). In ancient Greek, it was used to refer to migration and colonization. Later, it became more associated with a collective experience of trauma among specific ethnic or religious groups and their geographical dispersal. Armenians or Jews are an example of such ‘victim diasporas’ (Safran, 1991). Moving away from the idea of a traumatizing exodus, some scholars later argued that diaspora populations could also emerge from other forms of migration, such as labour migration. In this view, diaspora describes any transnational, dispersed ethnic group.

In addition to the definitions and classifications of diasporas in transnational studies, cultural studies understand the concept as socially constructed through discourse and representation. Diaspora is not seen as a fixed entity, social formation or experience. It is a collective process, involving recognition of a common emotional and cultural attachment to a(n imagined) community that exists beyond state borders. The construction of cultural belongings is inherent to the formation of diasporas (see Hall, 1990). The concept has been criticized, however, for its homogenizing nature. In their study on transnational Turkish communities, Aksoy and Robins (2003) formulated one of the most echoed criticisms. They argue that diasporic cultural studies remain caught up in a

national mentality and instead call for a transnational framework. Today, it is clear that both a diasporic and a transnational framework can exist next to each other, as diaspora may be regarded as a specific 'subset of transnational formations that have broader scope', as Faist (2010: 33) writes. Moreover, Faist argues, we ought to mobilize both the concept of diaspora and transnationalism to investigate agency and processes within global structures.

This moment of conceptual deconstruction and versatility is central here. When organizations and their self-representations are concerned, a third dimension of diaspora emerges: diaspora as *practice*. As Adamson (2008) writes, groups that are classified as immigrant groups in their country of residence can redefine themselves by taking on the label of diaspora: they can position themselves as members of a larger transnational community that exists beyond borders. Diasporic practices can therefore be understood as a source of empowerment. Thus, diaspora is not simply a descriptive term alluding to groups, experiences and belongings, but also a prescriptive term that allows for a cultural and political repositioning of groups. In our investigation of the relation between diaspora, organizations and communities, we will follow Brubaker's (2005) advice to use diaspora as an idiom, a stance, a claim: 'we should think of diaspora in the first instance as a category of practice, and only then ask whether, and how, it can fruitfully be used as a category of analysis' (p. 12). Therefore, we look at how diaspora is used empirically in the self-representations of organizations.

## Methodology

When studying transnational links and practices and diaspora organizations, definition, location and selection are most critical for the research process (Morales and Jorba, 2010). To start with, we defined Former Yugoslav organizations in the Netherlands as organizations of which at least half of the board members are of Former Yugoslav origin. As a second criterion, we looked solely at organizations that organize cultural and social events, leaving out organizations that focus on trade and business. This is because we are not interested in transnational activities *as such*, but rather in the cultural reproductions and discourses that arise from them in a specific local context. Through this selection, we narrowed down our subject of inquiry to social, religious and cultural diaspora organizations in the Netherlands that are led by people of Former Yugoslav origin.

We did not start from a fixed list of organizations, but instead considered the very search for organizations as a part of the analysis. We followed a two-track strategy to find organizations: expert interviews/snowballing and online search. We then used the retrieved phone numbers and e-mail addresses to start conducting interviews. Experts were mostly found using a snowball sampling technique. We considered as experts those people who were either actively involved in organizations or played an advisory role for organizations through their professional activities. The first round of interviews was with journalists, academics in the field of East–West European migration and board members of an umbrella organization for Southeast European migrants. From there, we were pointed to Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian organizations and experts. We stopped interviewing once the same names and organizations were mentioned, which was at the stage of the 25th expert interview. In total, we interviewed experts of 10 different

**Table 1.** Overview of expert interviews.

Respondent	Ethnic background	Occupation	Role
A	Bosnian	Academic	Board member
B	Bosnian	Artist	Board member
C	Bosnian	Journalist	Board member
D	Bosnian	Journalist	Board member
E	Bosnian	Other	Board member
F	Bosnian	Other	Board member
G	Bosnian	Journalist	Board member
H	Croatian	Artist	Board member
I	Croatian	Cultural entrepreneur	Board member
J	Croatian	Other	Board member
K	Croatian	Social entrepreneur	Board member
L	Dutch	Academic	External expert
M	Dutch	Cultural entrepreneur	Board member
N	Dutch	Journalist	Board member
O	Dutch	Social entrepreneur	External expert
P	Dutch	Social entrepreneur	External expert
Q	Serbian	Cultural entrepreneur	Board member
R	Serbian	Artist	Board member
S	Serbian	Cultural entrepreneur	Board member
T	Serbian	Pastor	Board member
U	Serbian	Social entrepreneur	Board member
V	Serbian	Other	Board member
W	South-European	Cultural entrepreneur	Board member
X	South-European	Social entrepreneur	External expert
Y	South-European	Social entrepreneur	External expert

organizations, which have their main activities in Dutch cities with large Former Yugoslav communities such as Rotterdam and Amsterdam.

The interviewed experts had the following ethnic backgrounds: seven Bosnians, four Croatians, five Dutch (no Former Yugoslav background), six Serbians and three South Europeans (see Table 1). They had a wide range of professions, including academics, social and cultural entrepreneurs, artists and a pastor among other occupations (see Table 1). In the beginning, we primarily interviewed external experts, while after a while we started interviewing board members from inside the organizations. In the analysis, we used the interviews with board members as the core data, while the interviews with external experts were used as background information and part of the search for organizations.

The semi-structured interviews included questions about the overall aim of the organizations and the target audience of their activities and events. Towards the end of the interview, we asked whether events were organized specifically for members of 'the diaspora'. In some cases, the interviewees had already mentioned the term in their previous answers. In most cases however, the question marked its first mentioning. This

question enabled us to connect the concept of diaspora with discourses in practice and therefore to evaluate the actual applicability of the theoretical concept to the case of Former Yugoslav migrants. Parallel with the expert interviews, we added an ethnographic element to our methodology by participating in a variety of events organized by the organizations. During these events, we had several informal conversations with participants ( $N = 7$ ). These conversations are used to get a better understanding of the research topic of diaspora organizations.

## Research results

### *Typology of organizations*

The search for organizations tells us something about the organizations in terms of visibility and language use by these organizations. We started our Google search by typing (in Dutch) ‘Serbian’, ‘Croatian’ and ‘Bosnian’ in combination with ‘organization in the Netherlands’. The initial search was little successful, but we found a Dutch umbrella organization of Southeast European migrants, listing many organizations, including three Bosnian, one Croatian and two Serbian organizations. Within the list of Bosnian organizations, we found a Bosnian umbrella organization that unites 29 partner organizations. No such umbrella organizations were found in the Croatian and Serbian case, and – in contrast to Bosnian organizations – there are only a few of them. Moreover, some of the Croatian and Serbian organizations appear to be no longer active: their websites are no longer maintained on a regular basis and/or contain out-of-date contact details. In contrast, Bosnian organizations in general seem well organized. The difference between Bosnian organizations on the one hand and Croatian and Serbian organizations on the other hand has consequences for the analysis, as we clarify below. In terms of language use, many websites were bilingual (Dutch and Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian, respectively), but there were also websites that did not use Dutch.

Around the same time, we conducted expert interviews (i.e. with an umbrella organization for Southeast European migrants, respondents P and Y). We found that there are also other organizations with Former Yugoslav migrants in the boards, but that are not structured around ethnic lines. Therefore, we conducted a second search online, combining search terms such as ‘Balkan’ and ‘Southeast European’ and ‘organization in the Netherlands’. This directed us to yet other organizations with Dutch and English websites showing many events and activities. Once we started interviewing the board members of these organizations (respondents I, M, Q and S), it turned out that they attracted large numbers of Former Yugoslavs. In other words, the first interviews with organizations showed that not all of them are organized along ethnic lines. We were therefore able to identify two types of organizations during the initial stage of analysis: ‘mixed’ diaspora organizations and ‘exclusive’ diaspora organizations.

*Mixed diaspora organizations* tend to aim at a broad, mixed audience. While some of them carry the label ‘Balkan’, others use ‘Southeast European’. Balkan in this sense denotes a cultural entity, referring to an identification with South-Eastern Europe, a region that not only includes Former Yugoslav countries such as Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina but also, for instance, Bulgaria and Turkey (Jordanova, 2001: 6). Conversely,

*exclusive diaspora organizations* focus on specific ethnic diaspora groups. They have a limited cross-ethnic appeal, a phenomenon that has also been observed elsewhere among Bosnian refugees (Eastmond, 1998; Franz, 2003). Board members of two Bosnian organizations (respondents A, C) confirm that their members are Bosnian Muslims only, regardless of their efforts to encourage non-Muslims to join. The latter, however, are more likely to become members of Croatian or Serbian organizations: Serbian Bosnians and Croatian Bosnians are members of Serbian and Croatian diaspora organizations, respectively. In other words, ethno-religious identity defines the organization of which people become a member.

To better grasp some of the nuances in the remainder of our story, a remark has to be made at this point: the very character of both types of organizations affected our heuristic strategies (cf. section 'Methodology'). Exclusive diaspora organizations are practically invisible and difficult to find online. They are often making use of Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian languages only. We had to be directed to them by the external experts and board members. Once we knew that there are also mixed diaspora organizations, we found that these are quite visible and easy to track down. They use Dutch and English language websites and advertise their events widely.

### *Diaspora definition*

The way in which target audiences are conceived within the two types of organizations is closely related to their view on the concept of diaspora. Both types of organizations have a different view on what constitutes a diaspora. In our interviews, the board members of *mixed diaspora organizations* did not consider themselves, or their fellow members, as part of a diaspora. They saw it as a dated concept, something that existed in the past. More precisely, they associated 'diaspora' with the old Yugoslav clubhouses that were founded by guest workers in the 1980s and that were involved with politics and the re-mobilization of nationalism.<sup>4</sup> Experts from mixed diaspora organizations had a specific view of diasporas as 'labour diasporas'. As Bosnian respondent E put it, 'Our events are not meant for the diaspora, but for cultural and like-minded people, regardless of ethnicity, nationality or religion'.

We notice a similar trend with the *Serbian and Croatian exclusive diaspora organizations*. Their board members (respondents J and V), similarly to those of mixed diaspora organizations, consider diaspora as an out-dated concept. They think of diaspora as something of the first generation, that is, the guest workers of the 1960s and 1970s, who 'had the need to have a Yugoslav community, watch Yugoslav TV and read Yugoslav newspapers', a Serbian event organizer (respondent V) says, adding that the 'current second and third generation is much more an in-between group with a hybrid identity, a hybrid group that is both Dutch and Serbian'. The focus on first-generation guest workers also explains why they are of less interest to migrants who arrived in the Netherlands during the Yugoslav wars.

In contrast, the heads of *Bosnian exclusive diaspora organizations* do identify themselves with the term diaspora. They use the label as a form of empowerment, for instance, in conversations with the Dutch or Bosnian governments. Furthermore, they discursively equate their organization with the diaspora and the Bosnian community. In the statutes of



a Bosnian organization, for instance, the organization is equated with ‘the community’: ‘[the organization] needs financial help to maintain its binding role in the community. This way, we avoid harming the Bosnian community’ (statutes, online). Nevertheless, it is estimated that only 5–10 percent of the people of Former Yugoslav origin is part of diaspora organizations (respondents A and J).

In other words, the understanding of diaspora is related to the different migration waves. During the first wave in the 1960s and 1970s, migrants were mainly Serbian and Croatian guest workers, who were well organized in Yugoslav clubhouses. Bosnians constituted the majority during the second wave of migration in the 1990s. After the break-up of Yugoslavia, organizations became organized along ethnic lines. The Dutch government started to cut subsidies, and many organizations disappeared. Moreover, there seemed more need to gather and organize, as their migration is more recent. In sum, it appears that ‘diaspora’ in the case of the organizations under scrutiny is discursively constructed as ‘first-generation migrants’.

### *Bonding and bridging*

The two types of organizations also have different primary aims. These aims can best be described and analysed using Putnam’s (2000) positive definition of social capital and two of its core processes: bonding and bridging (i.e. in-group and out-group social ties). Exclusive diaspora organizations are discursively pre-occupied with *bonding*: bonding between members, members and governments, both nationally and transnationally. The exclusive organizations are primarily inward-looking. They try to find support in a common identity and especially in gatherings, in togetherness among members of the same ethnicity. Again, we found a difference between the Bosnian organizations on the one hand, and Serbian and Croatian on the other. The interviews show that *Bosnian organizations* are intended to empower the diaspora, to strengthen their position in relation to the different states and to strengthen the position of the home country in relation to other European countries. Events often concern public debates on topics related to politics and the role of the Netherlands in the integration of the home country into the EU, as the board member of a Bosnian organization (respondent F) noted:

This organization attracts us. The bonds we feel with our home country are very intense. We share the same history, the same roots. It is important to intensify that feeling by means of events like workshops, films, lectures and so on. [...] We hope that our organization contributes to a better image of Bosnia so that it will soon become part of the European Union.

The Bosnian organizations are more focused on internal dynamics, concentrating on *bonding* among members, but also – to a lesser extent – on connecting with the Dutch government. A board member of a Bosnian organization explains why people become a member of her organization: ‘It attracts us. The connection we feel with our home country is very intense. We understand each other better than Dutch people understand us’ (respondent A). Bonding with ‘home’ – and people from the homeland – is the central cultural aim of Bosnian organizations. As the Bosnian organizations consist primarily of first-generation

migrants, a recent migration wave, the aims are related both to empowerment and to identity construction.

The interviewees of *Serbian organizations* say that they also focus on bonding between members, but that the interaction with the Serbian State is becoming less intensive. The Serbian and Croatian exclusive diaspora organizations started to become more entangled with religion in recent years. 'After the split-up of Yugoslavia, we were searching for our own identity. What does it mean to be Serbian? While in Yugoslavia practicing religion was discouraged, in the post-Yugoslav era we found our identity in religion', says a Serbian organizer (respondent V). Different from the 1960s and 1970s, the current Serbian organizations are much more centred around issues of identity and religion than on governmental issues. The same goes for the *Croatian organizations*. A Croatian organizer explains that they work closely together with the Church and organize events back in Croatia. They also collaborate with the embassy and the Croatian government. In the Yugoslav clubhouses of the 1970s and 1980s, it was the intermediary function that was important, the relation with the governments, while at the newly established Serbian and Croatian organizations, it is identity and religion which are at play. In other words, the interviews indicate that the Serbian and Croatian organizations, both consisting of first- and second-generation migrants, shifted focus from political concerns to a more identity-centred concern, and this is often religion-based.

Recently, therefore, we witness an establishment of new Serbian and Croatian organizations that are centred on identities and are established by second-generation migrants. For instance, a new Croatian organization was established that focuses on food events, sports and leisure activities. They primarily aim at bringing the first and second generations together. 'Our parents had no time to worry about issues of identity. They were pre-occupied with surviving. We have a much better future and start to investigate our roots', says a Croatian organizer (respondent J). In that sense, there is also a revival in Serbian and Croatian organizations; especially those aimed at youngsters are increasingly popular (respondents J, V). This generational difference is interesting. Unlike what Haller and Landolt (2005) and Portes et al. (2008) found, youth and second-generation immigrants seem to be equally concerned with transnationalism. In fact, the interviewees sometimes mentioned that youth is generally more concerned with the home country than their parents are. It corresponds with Boym's (2001) theorization of nostalgia, in which she states that '[f]irst-wave immigrants are often notoriously unsentimental, leaving the search for roots to their children and grandchildren unburdened by visa problems' (p. xv).

The respondents and websites of *mixed diaspora organizations* articulate explicitly in their mission statements that they aim to bring Southeast and West European cultures closer together. Aiming to form *bridges* between the new – in this case Dutch – culture and the former Yugoslav, Balkan and/or Southeast European cultures, Dutch and international people are also invited to attend their events. They often have mixed diasporic and Dutch members in their boards. However, we do notice some contra-defining against the Dutch among the mixed diaspora organizations (i.e. at least, by non-Dutch board members). Respondent S for instance says that, for him, 'ethnicity is not important, but the Dutch are the ones who would like to label us in ethnic groups'. Another board member of a mixed diaspora organization states that 'the Dutch are taking over the organization, making

Balkan into something exotic, so I am thinking of leaving the organization' (respondent R). Therefore, the bridging with the Dutch seems to go hand in hand with bonding mechanisms across the different former Yugoslav ethnicities.

Both mixed diaspora and exclusive diaspora organizations aim to foster belonging through the events they organize, either more internally focused (bonding) or outward-looking (bridging). In other words, both types of organizations are mainly concerned with forming imagined communities. This is where their role as cultural mediators comes into play. In the next section, we elaborate on this mediating role in relation to the imagined community of exclusive and mixed diaspora organizations.

### *Organizations and (imagined) communities*

The overall purposes of bridging and bonding of diaspora organizations can be understood in relation to their discursive approach to senses of belonging. As we argued above, based on the work of cultural media scholars such as Stuart Hall and David Morley, senses of belonging encompass different time–space dimensions, related to past, present and future understandings of the imagined communities and their ties of belonging. In this section, we look at the discourses about specific events in order to grasp the role of organizations in the creation of imagined communities. The events function as an interplay of physical and imagined togetherness.

For the Bosnian exclusive diaspora organizations, the interviews point out that the establishment of a *transnational imagined community* is at the core of their activities. A good example can be found in the 1 May celebrations at the Bosnian community:

Having a barbecue is not what counts for us on May 1st. It is the mere idea that it is also a tradition in Bosnia that makes it a special event. When we are singing songs, sitting outside, we know that they are doing the same thing in Bosnia, and in different countries around the world. (Respondent G)

The Bosnian diaspora organizations organize parallel events across the countries. A horizontal transnational imagined community with compatriots in other host countries and in their homeland is constructed by organizing parallel events and meetings. The Bosnian events also often relate to a *commemorative discourse*, as the Srebrenica massacre informs many events and activities for Bosnians.<sup>5</sup> They are a call for remembrance, making explicit that the events, victims and consequences of the genocide should not be forgotten. This historic dimension, engraved in the past, and the politically informed sense of belonging that comes with it relate to the present: it brings past events to the present political arena, making a point of their importance for the 'here and now'. This is probably also specific for the Bosnian diaspora in the Netherlands as the Netherlands was also involved in the defence of the Srebrenica enclave, leading to political and legal discussions to date.

Transnational horizontal communities are also built by the Croatian and Serbian organizations in our sample. For them, the national and religious holidays are celebrated. As such, their discourse does not differ from those informing the imagined communities constructed by the Bosnian organizations. For example, one of the participants of the

Orthodox Church told that for her, singing in a group is the most important identity indicator: 'By singing we are becoming part of a different atmosphere, making Serbs Serbs'. Their identity construction is ethno-cultural rather than political.

Importantly, the discourses described here are mainly non-ethno-nationalist. According to respondent S, the discourses of the former Yugoslav organizations in the late 1980s and their successive exclusive diaspora organizations in the 1990s were very ethno-nationalist as response to the Yugoslav wars during that period. In our sample of contemporary organizations, we did not find any divisive ethno-nationalist discourses. Whenever other ethnic groups were mentioned, it was rather to refer to differences in organizational structures. Instead of divisive ethno-nationalist narratives, ethno-cultural identity, generation and motive of migration are considered as prime axes of group identification.

For mixed diaspora organizations, the events help to establish an *imagined cross-cultural community*, aiming to build bridges with the Dutch and with other nationalities that participate in the events. Balkan culture and music is popular and this translates into large numbers of participants in the events. For the migrant participants, however, it seems that this cross-cultural bridging is not the main reason to participate. For them, the events create feelings of *nostalgia*. Former Yugoslav migrants who participate in events of mixed diaspora organizations are looking for a reconstructed 'Yugo-feeling', as the following quote by a Serbian social entrepreneur (respondent U) illustrates:

Why do we like films and music? [...] These cultural artefacts can bring you back to a lost time. Watching films gives us back some warm feelings. It is only short, but at least it brings us back to a time we loved.

Music, certain songs and familiar rhythms in particular trigger memories and emotions. They create a 'happy Yugoslavia of the 1980s in the Netherlands in the 21st century' (respondent I). This helps constructing imagined communities that refer to the past – to the Yugoslavia of the 1970s and 1980s – rather than to the present. It is an imaginary togetherness of a past community: a togetherness in memory. This 'Yugo-nostalgia' is also explored in the context of the Former Yugoslav countries themselves (e.g. Velikonja, 2008). Volčič (2007), for instance, understands the different forms of 'Yugo-nostalgia' as ambivalent: 'Yugo-nostalgia serves as an avoidance mechanism that postpones indefinitely a crucial reckoning with the socialist past and the role it played in exacerbating the tension that erupts in the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s' (p. 35). In the context of migration and diaspora, we would argue that nostalgia is not so much related to the Former regime, but to the homeland in general – a place that no longer exists. Mixed diaspora organizations are more focused on the here and now, striving for a common feeling of belonging that is related to the past. For the younger generation of experts in mixed organizations (i.e. those who were born after 1990 and were babies or toddlers during the wars), this nostalgia is not related to their own memories. It exists of feelings of cultural and historical belonging and *feelings of pride* (e.g. 'celebrating Balkan culture' by respondent Q, 'going back to our roots' by respondent I), feelings that are based on the stories of their family and their cultural background.

## Conclusion

Mainly using tools and insights taken from cultural studies, we have presented organizations as cultural mediators: they intend to play a role in shaping everyday cultural belongings and repositioning groups within socio-cultural and political space. They inform and constitute ties of belonging. We mainly relied on the connected concepts of 'imagined communities' and 'diaspora' to investigate Former Yugoslav organizations in the Netherlands. These concepts helped to underscore the constructionist and discursive underpinnings of belonging and the role that powerful social actors such as organizations play in it. Following Brubaker (2005), we recognized the multiplicity of meanings of 'diaspora' as experience, discourse and practice. We considered this conceptual deconstruction and versatility as a helpful way to use diaspora as a category of analysis.

While we started from a somewhat 'methodological nationalist' position (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002) assuming that diaspora organizations are constructed along ethno-national lines, soon enough we found that there are some organizations led by Former Yugoslavs that focus on regional identities, such as Balkan and 'South-East', which we labelled 'mixed diaspora organizations'. The mixed diaspora organizations fulfil the need for a multinational and multi-ethnic community by referring to a common history and (Balkan) culture, instigating nostalgia. In contrast, the exclusive diaspora organizations generally focus on ethnic belonging. The imagined communities built up from these organizations are horizontal and transnational. In sum, the 'transnational' in the case of the Former Yugoslav diaspora organizations in our sample does not only come to the fore in the simultaneous activities across different countries, but also into cross-cultural activities in the same countries, in our case the Netherlands. This again indicates that a diasporic and a transnational framework can go hand in hand.

The analysis suggests that the idea of a diasporic community goes beyond the mere numerical presence of migrants in the host country. Rather, our investigation suggests that mixed diaspora organizations and the Serbian and Croatian exclusive diaspora organizations think of diaspora as a phenomenon that finds its roots in the past, that is, especially relevant to the first wave of migration, the guest workers. This also explains why the concept of diaspora is still a valuable concept for Bosnian organizations; they primarily consist of first-generation migrants, refugees. For the Serbian and Croatian case, we also noticed the establishment of new organizations by second- and third-generation migrants. Generation seemed to be a key axe in the understanding of organizations and diasporas. For the older participants of events of mixed diaspora organizations, for example, it is the past 'there', in Former Yugoslavia that informs belonging. Belonging, in this case, is strictly understood as nostalgic. The constructionist approach to organizations is specifically apparent in their changes throughout the time. These vastly different discourses and meanings of diaspora should invite scholars to look deeper into the empirical use of the diaspora concept and to critically engage with its meanings outside academia.

Our study makes clear that diaspora organizations fulfil a range of functions while engaging with diasporic labels, communities and histories in very diverse ways. However, there is still little systematic research on the ways in which diaspora organizations operate as cultural mediators, and we call upon scholars to collect further evidence of these

multiple roles. Our own study has some limitations, which may serve as possible directions for future research. First, while engaging critically with the use of 'diaspora', we have given limited attention in our analysis to the use of labels such as 'refugee', 'guest worker' or 'migrant'. It could be useful to study how such markers of difference are mobilized by organizations to forge belongings among groups of people. Second, a historical perspective might be helpful to understand long-term changes in the roles of diaspora organizations. Organizations grow organically and are often defined by the voluntary commitment of a few members. But members may change, leave and join again. Organizations change their focus, disappear or are being (re)established. A more longitudinal study may capture such changes. Third, further research could be conducted among the participants of events, for instance, through surveys or more elaborate participant observations, to investigate how participants (as opposed to experts and board members) construct belongings through organizations' initiatives.

## Funding

This research was partially funded by the Media and Diaspora project, Utrecht University.

## Notes

1. This includes 'first' and 'second' generations. Population statistics on migration from Former Yugoslavia retrieved from the Dutch Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (<http://statline.cbs.nl>).
2. 'Croatian', 'Bosnian', 'Serbian' stand for national/civic and 'Croat', 'Bosniak', 'Serb' for ethnic/cultural identities. For matters of clarity, however, we explicitly mention 'ethnic' instead of 'Croat', 'Bosniak', 'Serb' to indicate ethnic identities. Moreover, in most cases, the organizations themselves use the national label while in fact they are rather organized along ethnic lines.
3. When using Anderson's theory, we should be aware of its specific historical and Western focus on print-capitalism.
4. A part of the Serbian and Croatian population became outposts for the national movements in their countries of origin (Conversi, 2000). These clubhouses started to close down in the 1990s and especially after 2003 when cities had to cut subsidies for (migrant) organizations. This is not unique for the Netherlands, nor for Former Yugoslav organizations. Oftentimes, organizations do not outlive the first generation of migrants (Schrover and Vermeulen, 2005: 824).
5. The Srebrenica massacre is a sensitive issue in the Netherlands. Dutchbat, a Dutch battalion, had to defend the Srebrenica enclave. It failed and 8000 Bosnian Muslims were killed by Serbian Bosnians (see Duijzings, 2007, on commemorating Srebrenica).

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