# Doubly Excluded, Doubly Included, "Something In-Between": A Bosnian Refugee Band and Alternative Youth Culture in Slovenia

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This paper is about a group of young Bosnian refugees who – after the breakup of Yugoslavia and the ensuing war in Bosnia-Herzegovina – migrated to Slovenia and formed a punk rock band called Nešto između (Something In-Between) at the Ilirska Bistrica refugee centre. This was not a well-known band and it was active for a rather short time, between 1995 and 1997.[1] However, the memories of it among its five members, which I have collected ethnographically, bring to light some lesser-known aspects of young Bosnian refugees' coping with exile and their music-making in Slovenia. The memoirs, as well as the artistic expression of the band, provide a portrait of how non-conformist and perhaps rebellious youth confronted the exile. I argue

1 Its beginnings were most likely in 1994.

that its experience was specific, because such youths were socially marginalised twice, firstly for being refugees and secondly for being nonconformists.

In this essay I would also like to highlight another dimension of the Bosnian exile in Slovenia in the 1990s. Among the numerous organisations working with refugees, some had a specific historical and social background, in that they were not "originally" aid organisations, but cultural, or more precisely, alternative (youth) culture organisations which were involved in providing aid. They were marked by a certain rebelliousness, which anthropologist Rajko Muršič observes is "displayed in the autonomous and critical reflections of those [young people] who care about what is happening in their surroundings and are prepared to take their own destiny and the destiny of their contemporaries into their own hands" (Muršič et al. 2012: 19). The adherents of such organisations are inclined to value nonconformist, and in many aspects marginal, members of society, as well as "alternative" or "underground" cultural expressions. Therefore, as reflexive and critical architects of Slovenian society, these organisations incorporate a specific disposition to recognise social marginalisation, for example such as that which afflicted the refugees in the 1990s.

Furthermore, these were not merely organisations, but usually operated their own venues, where more or less socially cautious people gathered and expressed themselves at concerts, poetry readings, public lectures, exhibitions, film screenings etc. Some of these venues had emerged already during the time of Yugoslavia (see Muršič et al. 2012) and some continued to cultivate relationships with individuals and organisations in this area after the breakup. This was not an environment that would praise the emerging nationalism in Slovenia or elsewhere. Therefore it is not surprising that a few alternative (youth) culture organisations mobilised resources in order to help the refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina, followed by those from Kosovo in the late 1990s. Yet, with respect to the aid policies, I argue that these organisations were specific with regard to their sensibility towards socially nonconformist and artistically creative youth among the refugees. In contrast to the working methods of other aid organisations, the activists and organisations discussed here were able to recognise the specific, usually socially critical, voices and artistic aspirations of the refugee youth. In this regard I argue that the members of Nešto između, whose careers were strongly impacted by the Slovenian alternative (youth) culture, were not only doubly excluded, but also – by agents of alternative (youth) culture – doubly included: firstly as refugees and secondly as nonconformists and underground artists.

## BOSNIAN REFUGEES IN SLOVENIA AND THEIR MUSIC-MAKING

The war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992–1995) caused mass migration. Thousands of refugees from the war-torn country found (temporary) homes abroad, including in Slovenia. According to one Red Cross report, in 1993 45,000 refugees were registered and another estimated 25,000 were unregistered in Slovenia. However, these numbers were always part of official and media discourses on the Bosnian exile, which were never unbiased (Đonlić and Črnivec 2003: 16, 29, 34). Anthropologist Natalija Vrečer therefore suggests that the early estimates were exaggerated: in September 1993, when the first official count was released, there were 31,100 refugees from the former Yugoslavia in Slovenia (Vrečer 2000: 4), while the number of refugees has constantly decreased since; in June 1997 around 7,000 and a year later only around 4,000 refugees remained in Slovenia (Vrečer 1999: 13). For the purpose of this article it is worth emphasising that the refugees also included teenagers and young people;[2] for example, it was reported by the Ministry of Education and Sport of the Republic of Slovenia that in the 1994/1995 school year, 1,060 refugees were attending secondary schools and 140 were students at the two universities (Đonlić and Črnivec 2003: 25–26).

Natalija Vrečer's critically engaged study of the state policies towards Bosnian and later Kosovan refugees is perhaps the most accurate anthropological account of the conditions with which refugees had to cope in Slovenia.[3] In her long-term study (1996, 2000, 2007) she shows that refugees were given temporary protection as refugees upon their arrival in Slovenia. However, in the course of their stay in the country they had to face the reality that this temporary protection was

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2 I would like to avoid getting into a discussion about the categories "children", "teenagers" and "young people". I use the terms rather loosely, more or less by associating childhood with pre-school and primary school, the teenage years as marked by puberty, adolescence and secondary school, while young people may include everything from teenagers to university students and people in their twenties or even early thirties.

3 In the 1990s, other ethnologists and/or anthropologists, especially from the younger generation, reflected on how the Bosnian refugees were coping with exile. Vrečer, at that time a lecturer at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Ljubljana, encouraged her students to carry out participant observation at the refugee centres (1999: 21–22). Some of this research has been published. For example, Nataša Rogelja (1999) not only researched, but also volunteered and made friends with refugees, and analysed encounters between refugees and Slovenian citizens; Peter Simonič (1999) describes a Slovenian newspaper's representation of refugees and claims that Slovenian citizens and refugees did not participate in the same information environment; Vesna Moličnik (1999), on the other hand, ponders the refugees' experience of god.

in fact provided in lieu of any more lasting solution. Because the refugees were given the status of "temporary refugee" instead of "convention refugee", they were deprived of many of the rights which follow from the Geneva Convention and other international treaties. Among the most fateful consequences was that they were not allowed to work, and had to make do by dragging themselves through the monotonous day-to-day survival patterns in the refugee centres. Bosnian refugees in Slovenia were thus constantly, from the time of their migration into the 2000s, living in uncertainty about their destiny.

Vrečer's ethnographic study focuses on the conditions in the refugee centres and how refugees coped with exile in the selected refugee centres.[4] Many of her findings correspond to the ethnography on Nešto između presented below. The refugee centres were in many cases established in the military barracks left behind by the former Yugoslav People's Army. The living conditions in the centres were not compliant with adopted standards: the rooms were obviously too crowded, and there was no space for intimacy (Vrečer 2000: 6). Moreover, the centres were located "in the suburbs [of towns]. Because of the absence of integration models into Slovenian society, the centres resemble ghettos" (2000: 7). Another thing that refugees had to cope with was the food in the centres, which was – for cultural reasons as well as for the way it was prepared for the masses – according to the refugees, tasteless. Additionally, some refugees were forced to move from one refugee centre to another, which was yet another stressful experience perceived as repeated uprooting (2000: 7). The social networks created in the centres were therefore unstable and a possible source of additional feelings of loss.

One of the most problematic aspects of the exile that this researcher identifies is the right to work, as well as the (associated) right to participate fully in the Slovenian social and cultural milieu. Until 1999, refugees were "allowed to work only eight hours per week, which, of course, [was] not sufficient to solve their economic problems" (Vrečer 2000: 9). As one interlocutor explained to the ethnographer:

> The biggest problem of the exile in Slovenia is no work. My grandfather is in hospital, because he has no work. He's fatigued by his nerves. He was always doing something at home. As we all did. (Vrečer 2007: 104)

This situation was especially traumatic for the men, who were used to being socialised as workers and whose masculinity was constructed on

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4 Altogether there were 58, and by 2000 just 10 refugee centres were still operating in Slovenia (Vrečer 2000: 6).

breadwinning (Vrečer 2000: 12). Many therefore worked illegally and for low wages.

With regard to participation in social and cultural life in Slovenia, Vrečer concludes that adults, living in the secluded spaces of the refugee centres, faced greater difficulties than children and young people:

> Children seem to recover most quickly from the stresses of conflict and have the least difficulties in adaptation to the foreign country. They also learn the new language more quickly than adults. The care of their parents, especially the mothers, who maintained the homely routine in exile, lessened the culture shock effects and functioned preventively in the psychosocial condition of the children. School was another important factor that functioned preventively because it structured their time and enabled them to maintain continuity in education. (2000: 11)

Of course, the children and young people were not living in cotton wool, but were facing specific problems, including with regard to schooling (Vrečer 2000: 11–12). Some of the specific problems of the young will be addressed below.

With respect to young people and music, the personal memoires of and research conducted by young Bosnian refugees – Hazemina Đonlić and Vesna Andree Zaimović in particular – remain a valuable contribution to the examination of refugee conditions in Slovenia.[5] Here are some insights I wish to point out: In January 1993, some refugee music teachers, who had previously taught at the Ilidža music school in Sarajevo, initiated an educational programme for children and young people called Cultural Weekend for Children from Bosnia and Herzegovina (henceforth CWCBH), which was held at the Vodnik Manor House in Ljubljana.[6] Reportedly, more than one hundred children attended their musical, fine arts, literary, choir singing, artistic copperworking etc. workshops (Đonlić and Črnivec 2003: 40–41). Đonlić, at that time a young refugee and project collaborator, writes that such programmes were necessary, because although the children were attending primary school, the young people were not always involved in education, but would rather "aimlessly wander around Ljubljana or spend quite monotonous days in the refugee centres, where their only obligation was queuing for food and cleaning the corridors" (Đonlić and Črnivec 2003: 40). The CWCBH environment was obviously empowering for some young people and students, whose creativity was rewarded there. For example, Farah Tahirbegović, at that time a young student, who in a specific music-related milieu in Slovenia gradually became famous as

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5 On the role of music in the exile of Bosnian children in Slovenia see also Pesek (1996).

6 The Vodnik Manor House is a well-known cultural venue.

the singer of the band Dertum, published a book of short stories as early as 1993 which were full of longing for home – her *A Letter to My Parents* (*Pismo roditeljima*) was published as part of a collection of works called the Exile-abc Collection (Biblioteka Egzil-abc) by the CWCBH. One of the members of Nešto između, Dži,[7] was also encouraged by the CWCBH collaborators to publish his early poems.

Vesna Andree Zaimović was another refugee student who played a significant role in shaping the musical programme of the CWCBH, and later researched the exile from an ethnomusicological point of view. As a supervisor and the leader of Vali, an ensemble operating as part of the CWCBH, she cross-bred traditional musical styles with popular music, e.g. pop and rock, and formed a collaboration between Vali and the Slovenian rock star Vlado Kreslin. Her ethnomusicological analysis focused on the *sevdalinka* – a traditional song based on oriental scales – as Bosnian heritage performed in Slovenia by young refugees (2001). Two musical groups, Vali and Dertum, are featured in her work. Both were visible players on the Slovenian 1990s "world-music" scene, but the latter was also important for getting *sevdalinkas* (as well as other traditional forms from the territory of former Yugoslavia) noticed on the Slovenian underground music scene. In her analysis, however, Andree Zaimović emphasises the identity aspects of *sevdalinkas* for Bosnians in exile (cf. Kozorog and Bartulović 2015).

Moreover, the refugees' *sevdalinkas* were commented on by the Slovenian folklorist Marko Terseglav, who recorded refugee musician Amir Otanović and his collaborators in 1994 and later proposed that "folk spiritual culture or folk music proves to be the only tangible remains of the broken ethnicity and its culture", which thus helps refugees "survive the worst moments, and at the same time helps them to maintain their own cultural and ethnic identity in a foreign [...] environment" (Terseglav 2001: 260).[8]

Analyses of Bosnian music-making in exile thus predominantly focused on *sevdalinkas*, traditional music, musical heritage and cultural identity, while the refugees' popular, alternative and underground musical expressions have so far been neglected (cf. Kozorog and Bartulović 2015; Kozorog 2015). Hopefully, this essay will add a missing piece to the mosaic of Bosnian refugees' artistic creativity in Slovenia.

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7 In agreement with the band's members, I have referred to them by their nicknames. However, in the case of Dži, who has gradually become an acknowledged poet, I would like to reveal his name – he is Enes Kurtović.

8 Outside Slovenia, Bosnian refugees' music-making has been researched by the following ethnomusicologists: Svanibor Pettan in Norway (1996); and Ursula Hemetek and Sofia Bajrektarević in Austria (2000).

I sometimes listen to a tape I have of a live recording by Nešto između from 24 October 1997, made at the Nada Žagar Youth Club (Mladinski klub Nade Žagar) (henceforth MKNŽ) in Ilirska Bistrica.[9] The tape dates to a time when many refugees were returning to their country from Slovenia (see Đonlić and Črnivec 2003: 35), and this was among the reasons for the band's breakup after the concert at MKNŽ. Their lead singer, Mohe, had returned in August 1997, which is why his roommate and cousin, Dži, who was primarily the band's ideologist and lyricist, jumped in as vocalist for the final few gigs. The performance at MKNŽ is about to start and the sharp sound of an electric guitar slowly moves over an "oriental scale". As the guitarist Amir repeats the scale, Dado, the drummer, embellishes the intro with cymbals and percussion. The guitar speeds up, the drummer starts a punk rock beat, and Pino, the bass player, joins the groove. An oriental melody performed on distorted guitar then floats over heavy drumming and percussive bass notes throughout the piece. At one point, a high male voice sings over a few tones as if expressing *sevdah*, a feeling of melancholic yearning that is usually expressed in *sevdalinkas*. This vocalisation is suddenly broken with a shout of "*abaaaa*", a passionate call that could imitate moments of empowerment during (male) drinking of alcohol. When the song is over, Dži says: *"Good evening, we come from..."*, but he is interrupted by Amir's introduction: *"Thank you, we're refugees."* Dži continues with a statement full of significance: *"This wasn't Dertum"*, alluding to the fame of the group Dertum and its popularisation of *sevdalinkas* for the Slovenian underground audience. However, with regard to repertoire, Nešto između differed substantially from Dertum; after playing the "oriental" introduction, they continued the concert with their own punk rock numbers and some cover versions of Yugoslav punk rock hits.[10] With the introduction they in a way were commenting that although (Dertum's) *sevdalinkas* represent young Bosnian refugees in Slovenia (above all in underground venues such as MKNŽ), which is why they performed this piece in the first

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**9** The band's recordings are available on internet – see DEMOnDIZK 1997.

**10** For example, they performed the song 'United' by Kud Idijoti, and 'Anarhija, all over Baščaršija' by Zabranjeno pušenje. In the case of 'United', whose lyrics are "united rakija [schnapps], united pivo [beer], united pizza", pizza is substituted with "pita", which is a famous Bosnian food, also popular in Slovenia, where it is known as "burek". Perhaps this was part of the band's humour, on which Dži has commented: *"Humour was food!"* The importance of food and food metaphors in the lives of these youngsters was considerable.

place, they were not very different from the nonconformist Slovenian youth, who at that time were crazy for punk rock.

The intro played at the concert is called 'Kad će ta prokleta večera?' ('When Is That Damned Supper?'). As with the group's other songs, there is a story or an explanation behind it. In this case it is a simple one: the question in the title was an everyday question at the refugee centres, where waiting for something to happen was endless and where the food was repulsive. In fact, the band was formed at one of the centres – the Trnovo refugee centre, located in the abandoned army barracks on the outskirts of Ilirska Bistrica – where some of its members lived for years.[11] They told me that life there was monotonous; three of them travelled daily to another town, Postojna, to attend secondary school, however, at the refugee centre they could not see anything changing. It was all about waiting for supper. Yet, they proved (to themselves) that breaking the routine and changes are possible even in a secluded environment. As a band, they performed at the centre and outside of it, they made friends with musical and political activists in Slovenia and abroad, and they released a demo cassette, called *Antilogija* (*Anti-logic*).[12]

Although the beginnings of the band could be depicted as tentative recastings of Yugoslav rock classics, the members soon decided to write their own music (see Kozorog 2015). This approach made a space for the members to be able to express their own experiences and feelings.[13] Some of their lyrics intimately reflected on inner states, while others commented on important political events, e.g. the Dayton Agreement, which in the song called 'Sam Motherfucker' ('Uncle Sam the Motherfucker') or 'Dejtonska bajka' ('Dayton Fairytale') is framed as a false happy ending with no foundation for hope. Furthermore, the lyrics also reported about and openly confronted what these male adolescents were living through in their everyday lives. Especially in this latter case the songs have certain ethnographic significance, which I will explore below.

I would like to give an overview of what Nešto između was singing about, in order to provide a hint about what was on the boys'

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**11** Pino, the bass player, was a native of Ilirska Bistrica, while the other members were refugees who were living at the refugee centre.

**12** This is a play on words: in the Slovenian word for "anthology" the letter "o" is replaced by the letter "i", so that the meaning of this neologism can be understood as "anti-logic" (against logic).

**13** In contrast, Dertum and Vali dedicated their careers mainly to the refashioning of traditional songs, so that their songs do not contain any direct reflections of what life was like for young refugees.

minds and what they were going through. In one particularly biting song, entitled (in English) 'Peggy's Farm',[14] the Trnovo refugee centre is pictured as a farm and its manager is straightforwardly referred to by his pseudonym. The slap was obviously intended to be direct, if not also personal. The song in Bosnian states that there is a nasty building on the edge of the town that only small children, who do not yet understand their situation, call "home". In accordance with the particular perception of refugees in Slovenia at that time, the people living in this building are then described as strange, ungrateful and impolite, and, as the English lyrics reveal, they "don't know to say 'Please!', Peggy's temporary refugees". Indeed, as noted above, the Slovenian state had given them the status of "temporary refugees", while the Slovenian mass media sometimes anxiously worried about "excessive humanitarianism" and the "financial burden" on the state, and at the same time praised "Slovenian good-heartedness" (Simonič 1999: 55, 60, 61). In the public discourse on Slovenia's policy towards refugees, they were defined as welcomed, and so the refrain goes: "Welcome, welcome, welcome to the Peggy's farm." The second part of the song is in Slovenian, an invitation to a Slovenian who might want to meet the refugees. It gives directions on how to find them, saying that although it might sound illogical, their "centre", their place of residence, i.e. the "refugee centre", is in fact not in the centre, but on the edge of the town – it is geographically marginalised. This, as the members of the band have told me, was frustrating for a number of different reasons, including firstly the lack of company and the possibility of socialising with their peers from the town, and secondly the large distance from MKNŽ (I will come back to this point below). The song finishes with sounds imitating animals. The emphatic analogy of Bosnians as animals locked up on a farm was thus complete.

In addition, reflections on the differences between refugees were also part of the band's commentary. In another song from the demo, called 'Muhiba' or 'Ružan osjećaj' ('Bad Feeling'), portrays a generational conflict. Muhiba is an older lady who is continuously coming into the narrator's room. Therefore, a bad feeling occurs from expecting another of her unannounced appearances, during which she would invariably tell boring stories that destroy his "dirty little world". She comes to visit because she does not have anyone else to talk to in this foreign environment. Yet she does not understand that the young man has his own wishes and ideas, and that while she is interested in

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**14** Perhaps there is a reference to another rebellious song, Bob Dylan's 'Maggie's Farm', which states "I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more...".

what the "idiot on the TV says", his thoughts are with "the mosque, Mak,[15] Marx and Nietzsche".

There really was not much space for intimacy in the building where the refugees were living (see Vrečer 2007).[16] Since in many cases these were former army barracks, the rooms were arranged in a line along shared corridors, while the toilets and showers were also shared. The rooms were usually occupied by several family members, so that the chronic lack of space was occasionally suffocating, while intimacy was a more or less unfulfilled dream.

Yet, space was also important for the band's existence. In this respect, the band had a bit of luck, since two members, Mohe and Dži, shared a room, which happened to be at the end of the barracks' corridor, where their evening creative eruptions did not disturb too many neighbours. However, in the room they were mostly listening to music, having conversations, reading and writing poetry, and delving into other creative fields, e.g. visual arts,[17] and they needed another place for the band's rehearsals. In this regard too, they were not faced with the worst possible conditions. The refugee centre's management provided a venue for the activities of the refugee youth.[18] However, this venue turned out to be another situation where the social divisions among refugees came to light. Namely, the venue started to function as a kind of a discotheque, where mainstream popular music was filling up the space. This was not exactly the kind of environment that the band members and associates would view as a "youth venue", since their perception of such places was one that engenders creativity and stimulates personal expression. The discotheque was too conformist a choice, with which they could not identify. Therefore, they moved to the place next door, a former military storehouse, and renovated it for their own purposes. In a play on words based on the Bosnian word for "place" ("prostorija"), they called it "space and me" ("prostor i ja"),

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**15** The Bosnian poet Mak Dizdar (1917–1971).

**16** 'Muhiba' was in fact inspired by an experience in a private home in Ljubljana, and not in a refugee centre. Nevertheless, the portrait it provides is even more accurate for refugee centres.

**17** Gradually, the various expressive activities of three of the band members, Mohe, Dži and Amir, including their engagement in Nešto između, were conceptualised by themselves as an artistic movement, called Sprung. The non-musical activities are certainly important for my understanding of the musical ones as well as for the whole context of the exile. For example, Sprung's installation with one hundred newspaper weather forecasts is a fine example of their commenting on the repetitiveness of everyday life in the refugee centre (for more see Kozorog 2015). However, due to the lack of space in this article I will skip the broader activities of Sprung and limit the analysis to the music.

**18** In this regard a member of the band even commented in an ethnographic interview that in the song 'Peggy's Farm' they were perhaps judging the management too harshly.

thus underscoring the multifaceted importance of space in their contemporary lives and for their personal expression.

And so we have come to the exclusions announced in the title of this article. At the refugee centre the band members excluded themselves from associating with other youths, which they did not only for practical reasons, i.e. rehearsing, but also for ideological reasons, i.e. empowered by a certain (sub)cultural capital (see Thornton 1995). They acted in a manner in which nonconformist youth acted outside the refugee centre, where in the 1990s Slovenian youth also established many alternative (underground) venues (see Muršič et al. 2012). They were also emphasising their difference through their physical appearance, i.e. in their hairstyles, how they dressed, walked, behaved. Of course, the binary pictured here idealises the reality, since in reality the boundaries between social milieus are usually transgressed. Nevertheless, behaving as nonconformist youth, as rebels, as opponents of the "mainstream" in the refugee environment, they were building a specific refugee youth identity and an awareness of their own specific (alternative) cultural validity.

For this same reason they were experiencing an extra amount of trouble, especially outside the refugee centre. In the town they were seen as both refugees and "punks," and thus they were, indeed, doubly excluded. As commented on in 'Peggy's Farm', the refugees were physically separated from the Slovenian citizens and alienated from the happenings in Ilirska Bistrica. In another song, entitled 'Ulice Ilirske Bistrice' ('The Streets of Ilirska Bistrica'), the narrator speaks about walking the streets of the town, which he knows by heart, and although he sees familiar faces, he does not know their names. And they are not interested in him anyhow: "They pass me by, no one notices me, on the street I leave no trace." However, this is how it is during the daytime. After dark he again walks the streets, this time in a bunch who called themselves the "eternal walkers". The "punks" from the refugee centre regularly walked between the two sides of the town, between the Trnovo refugee centre on the one side and the MKNŽ on the other. However, such walks were not always pleasant, since they were repetitively stopped and interrogated by the police, to whom they referred in the song as "the policemen – our old acquaintances". In their opinion, the police were messing with them for two reasons: firstly, because they were inhabitants of the refugee centre, and secondly, because they were "punks" visiting MKNŽ.[19]

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**19** In addition, I was told that the police were not rude to them only when they visited MKNŽ, but also on their way to the school in Postojna, where three of them travelled daily making a one hour trip by train. However, in this case they might have been being interrogated just for being "different-looking" youth, and not necessarily as refugees.

Let me finish this section by mentioning exactly what MKNŽ meant to these young people, i.e. why they were walking through the town at night in the first place. Entering the secondary-school in the town of Postojna in 1993/1994, Amir, Dado and Mohe's schoolmates soon told them about the alternative (youth) culture in the town where they lived, Ilirska Bistrica. This town was in fact famous throughout Slovenia, MKNŽ being a mandatory stop for alternative rock bands touring Europe. Many European, but also US hard-core, punk-rock, experimental jazz and avant-garde rock bands performed at MKNŽ (frequently leaving the Slovenian capital off of their touring itineraries). MKNŽ was therefore a very unique venue in the Slovenian context (see Muršič et al. 2012: 74–82; Poklar 2011), and as such was attended by both local and non-local youth. The guys from Nešto između, who were clearly inclined towards new musical expressions in the field of rock music, therefore became passionate about what was going on "on the other side of town". They were so enthusiastic about it that even though they were not allowed to leave the refugee centre at night, they jumped over the wall surrounding the complex in order to escape to the club. In fact, by visiting MKNŽ they became acquainted with new musical trends and the do-it-yourself ethic, which was an important step for dropping Yugoslav rock from their repertoire and starting to write their own material. However, music was not the only reason MKNŽ was important for the band. In the next section, I will come back to MKNŽ as one of the few alternative (youth) culture organisations that were intertwined in the band's career.

## AGAINST (NATIONALIST) CONFORMISM, AND FOR THE RECOGNITION OF SOCIALLY REFLEXIVE, SELF-EXPRESSIVE, ARTISTICALLY SKILLED AND HEADSTRONG YOUNG REFUGEES

In this section I discuss organised aid for Bosnian refugees in Slovenia (cf. Đonlić and Črnivec 2003: 18–21, 37–38, 46–47; Vrečer 2007: 80–90). Specifically, I focus on organisations that were primarily involved with alternative (youth) cultural production, and not with humanitarian aid. I am not the first to discuss the role of such organisations (cf. Đonlić and Črnivec 2003: 38–40; Vrečer 2007: 89), though I think that their background in alternative (youth) culture has not been adequately addressed yet. One of the cultural organisations whose role has been sufficiently examined is the Vodnik Manor House in Ljubljana (Andree Zaimović 2001; Đonlić and Črnivec 2003: 40–45).

However, this organisation – which was, indeed, personally important for Dži, who as a student in Ljubljana was pulled in by its centripetal forces and thus discovered his own ability and passion for writing poetry – was different from the organisations that I wish to explore here. That is, the Vodnik Manor House was, so to say, a "high culture" venue, which also housed a public library, and, more importantly, the cultural programme for refugees there was organised by the refugees themselves (see above). One other organisation in Ljubljana has been noted in the literature, KUD France Prešeren,[20] and its programme for refugees called the Exiles Project (Projekt pregnanci ) (Đonlić and Črnivec 2003: 38–40; Muršič et al. 2012: 43; Vrečer 2007: 89). This nest of alternative (youth) culture is precisely the kind of organisation I wish to explore here, whereby I will also pay attention to other similar organisations operating in Slovenia at that time.

If aid organisations were helping refugees because this was their goal, alternative (youth) cultural organisations were doing it for other motives, one of them being their oppositional stance toward conformism in society. After the breakup of Yugoslavia, Slovenian state policy was marked by nationalism, promoting an "our people first" agenda. The first ruling party, Demos (1990–1992), was openly hostile towards nationals of other former Yugoslav republics, and in 1992 the state leadership committed the cold-hearted administrative act of erasure of thousands of ethnically non-Slovenes from the register of residents of Slovenia (see Lipovec Čebron and Zorn 2011). Against such state policy and against xenophobia in society (which was not yet common, but was gaining impetus with the help of a few political parties), a few cultural organisations would intervene on behalf of refugees, whereby – also as part of their usual agenda – they actively approached the self-expressive, socially aware, artistically skilled and headstrong (young) individuals among the refugees. Through the case of Nešto između, I will give an overview of these organisations.

From the information I received in the interviews conducted with the band members, one organisation stands out markedly. This was an Italian organisation from Pesaro, whose members were making regular visits to the refugee centre in Ilirska Bistrica. This organisation was special, as my interlocutors remember, because its aid was based on personal contacts and on recognising the individual needs of the people at the Trnovo centre. My interviewees recall that most aid organisations brought food and clothes in containers, without establishing

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**20** "KUD" stands for "cultural artistic association".

personal contacts with them. The Italians were different precisely because they engaged in conversations with individual refugees, asking about their specific needs, and, especially important for the kids, taking them out to the cinema and the like. The Italians, who via their personal contacts were able to find out what is "really" (personally) important to someone at the refugee centre, were also the first to recognise that some of the boys wanted to play music, but they could not purchase the equipment by themselves. Thus, Nešto između received some musical instruments from the Pesaro activists. After musical instruments had been provided and the band could finally function, Nešto između made a guest appearance at an Italian music festival,[21] where they were brought by these same activists.

MKNŽ was another important agent in the band's career. Secondary school boys at the time, today they remember that they were welcomed and recognised by the club's staff as refugees. As a gesture of hospitality they were exempt from paying the entrance fee, which was according to their judgement a proper gesture for persons with no income. Moreover, in the course of time MKNŽ activists invited them to collaborate in the organisation of concerts, which means that they were introduced to a do-it-yourself approach that encompasses everything from preparing the equipment and venue for a gig to cleaning up after it. They might have been invited to become collaborators of the club because they were regular visitors (as sometimes happens in such venues that visitors are incorporated into organising staff), but it is also possible that they were invited as refugees who needed a small fee from this work as well as integration into the social milieu. At least for Dado, this was the beginning of a career as a concert promoter, which continued into his adulthood. After the band switched from Yugoslav rock covers to original punk rock songs, which was again influenced by the MKNŽ's exclusively original and unconventional concert programme, it was the people at MKNŽ who first recognised the value of their original music-making. The band was invited to perform at MKNŽ and to make a presentation at a festival of young local bands,[22] while after a year of rehearsing MKNŽ also arranged a studio recording and released the demo cassette.

MKNŽ was arguably the most important organisation in the band's career, at least with regard to musical aesthetics and the band's affirmation. It was a high-quality local organisation on which they could rely whenever they had conceptions about their own artistic and

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**21** At that time they were still a cover band, occupied with the heritage of Yugoslav popular music (see Kozorog 2015: 24).

**22** The Feistritz festival in December 1996.

cultural endeavours. However, other related organisations collaborated with the band as well. For example, Amir remembers that youth activists in nearby Postojna were involved with refugees too, organising cultural activities at the town's refugee centre, where Nešto između performed in the spring of 1996.[23] In addition, when the band held its own concert for fellow refugees at the Trnovo centre in the spring of 1997, and invited the Slovenian hard-core band 2227 to take part, it was very likely assisted by MKNŽ, but also by KUD France Prešeren. The latter's report on activities in the first half of 1997 states:

> On 25 May the refugee centre [in Ilirska Bistrica] was visited by the group 2227, and the opening act was Nešto između. With huge effort we managed to make the concert an open event in which the locals were allowed to participate. In the future we intend to hold more concerts [at refugee centres], if possible for the general public, but we expect to have some problems because of having to hire a PA system.

Clearly, in such cases the oppositional attitude of alternative (youth) culture organisations was transmitted into the refugee centres, e.g. the battle to the open the refugee centre to the general public for the concert. Coalitions of like-minded people were then formed between refugees and non-refugees.

Another organisation with a similar goal of opening up the refugee centres and filling them up with the alternative and socially critical youth culture was the Association of Tribal Communities and Medicine Men (Zveza plemenskih skupnosti in vračev). Its core membership was in the Koper Youth Cultural Centre (Mladinski kulturni center Koper) (henceforth MKC Koper). The latter organised concerts and art programmes in several refugee centres in Slovenia. Nešto između played one of their final gigs (in October 1997) at its venue in the town of Koper, while afterwards one of the band's members, Dado, found his occupation and personal anchorage there.[24] To summarize,

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23 Actually, the band's first public performance took place at the very end of 1995 at the Trnovo refugee centre as a warm-up for the gig at the festival in Italy that followed soon after. Back in Slovenia, in the spring of 1996 one concert at MKNŽ is reported (in KUD France Prešeren's documents – see below) and two concerts at the Postojna refugee centre, where they performed together with another young refugee rock band from the refugee centre in Črnomelj. A refugee rock band called Centralno grijanje (Central Heating) was also working at the Vodnik Manor House in Ljubljana, while the precursor of Dertum was a rock band called Durum. Most of these bands performed Yugoslav rock, which was also popular in Slovenia as an anti-nationalist, yet ambivalent, form of expression (Muršič 2007; Stanković 2002).

24 It is worth mentioning that another prominent Bosnian musician worked at MKC Koper for a while during or soon after the war: Senad Hadžimusić - Teno, the founder of Sarajevo hard-core group SCH.

a few alternative (youth) culture organisations were engaged and mutually collaborative in providing art programmes inside the refugee centres (and thus opening them up), and, significantly, in recognising refugee artists as important cultural producers in Slovenia.[25]

On the horizon of such organisations one stands out mightily. This is KUD France Prešeren in Ljubljana, whose archive I was able to study.

## KUD FRANCE PREŠEREN AND THE EXILES PROJECT AS A REFLEXIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH THE EXILE

KUD France Prešeren (henceforth KUD) is a fine example of an alternative (youth) culture organisation that was involved with refugees (especially children), but was also quite focused on (alternative) artists, social activists and reflexive individuals among them. KUD's aid activities started way back in the spring of 1992, after the first Bosnian refugees entered Slovenia, and continued into the 2000s. The perpetual motto of this organisation's programme for refugees, entitled the Exiles Project, was the following:

> In order to break through the barriers of the cultural and social ghetto in the refugee camps, we began working with [people exiled from Bosnia-Herzegovina] in the field of culture and art, where members of the project team were already active before. We present our own culture to the exiles and at the same time, together with them, keep their cultural heritage alive and present it to Slovenian and European audiences. In this way, we promote mutual influences and the enrichment of different social and cultural patterns.

In addition to its general goal to provide a platform for intercultural respect and learning, it proposed methods for this to happen, which incorporated both the organisation's cultural background and its venue, also called KUD France Prešeren:

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**25** On 22 October 1997, Nešto između and Dertum, together with a representative of MKC Koper, took part in a refugee recognition programme at the student radio station MARŠ and in the alternative club Kibla, both in the town of Maribor. In addition, as university students (i.e. after 1997) Dado and Amir were active at Radio Student in Ljubljana, a very important radio station in regard to the recognition of refugees, which also broadcast the well-known antinationalist show *Nisam ja odavde* (*I'm Not From Here*), dedicated to non-Slovenian students in Ljubljana, through the 1990s.

> The Exiles Project attempts to widen the access to cultural riches and modes of creation to those who are most excluded from participating in them. The exiles attend performances at KUD and together we organise and produce concerts, exhibitions, evenings of poetry, plays, round table discussions etc. Slovenian and foreign music, theatre, puppet and dance groups visit the refugee centres and their inhabitants. These events are also attended by the local population. Creative workshops take place at the centres and their participants perform for their peers as well as the broader Slovenian and frequently also international audience.
>
> One of the most important goals of the project is to support groups and individuals [among the refugees] who want to present their creativity to the general public and have enough energy and courage to take the necessary first steps. We thus began to cooperate with a group of exile university and secondary-school students who brought their musical creativity together in a group called Dertum.

In these endeavours, Dertum was certainly one of KUD's parade horses (for more on Dertum see Kozorog and Bartulović 2015). However, a number of other successful projects were run under the umbrella of the Exiles Project. For example, a young refugees' theatre group, Nepopravljivi optimisti (Incorrigible Optimists), was formed at KUD in 1992, mentored by the Slovenian actress Draga Potočnjak. It staged several original plays: *Kuća bez krova* (*The House Without a Roof*) from 1994, which presented life stripped of intimacy at a refugee centre; *Dođi makar sebi ako nemaš kome drugom* (*At Least Come to Yourself, If You Don't Have Anyone Else*) from 1995, which was co-authored by Igor Serdarević; *I mirna Bosna* (*And Peaceful Bosnia*) from 1997, which was made in collaboration with the Ana Monro Theatre (Gledališče Ane Monro ).[26] In addition, in the framework of the Exiles Project, music lessons for children were established and taught by the Slovenian guitarist, pedagogue and author Etbin Štefančič, later joined by Hazemina Đonlić.[27] Štefančič led an ensemble composed of Bosnian children, called Putujući zemljotres (Itinerant Earthquake) at the refugee centre in the town of Škofja Loka, and a teenage Orff orchestra, Mašta može svašta (Imagination Unlimited), at the refugee centre in the town of Tolmin. The latter was invited to play in July 1995 at the closing ceremony of the international campaign All Equal, All Different at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, where they were joined in performance by the famous violinist and conductor

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**26** The last two plays included original music by Dertum.

**27** According to the information I obtained, KUD's musical programme for children was held at the following refugee centres: Škofja Loka, Tolmin, Bloke, Postojna and Črnomelj.

Yehudi Menuhin. In addition, KUD organised creative workshops for refugees and local residents, e.g., on photography mentored by Vesna Črnivec, and published works by young Bosnian poets.

The Exiles Project received a fair amount of international recognition. For example, it represented Slovenia at the international TV promotion of the European Youth Campaign against Racism, Xenophobia, Anti-Semitism and Intolerance in December 1994 in Finland, where its contribution received the second-place Prize of Europe award. Such awards and recognitions were not sufficient in themselves, but were used by KUD to put pressure on policymakers to implement changes in the lives of refugees. For example, the award from Finland was used to convince the authorities to enable young refugees to travel and perform at refugee centres outside Slovenia. In addition to its cultural-artistic activities, this organisation was also heavily involved in making changes to legislation, especially with regard to the refugees' right to work.

Nešto između was not a major concern of KUD, but nevertheless, the endeavours of the young musicians were recognised by this organisation quite early in the band's career. In fact, the first time the band appears in the organisation's documents is in a report about its activities in 1996. The genealogy of their early relations is presented as follows:

> The group existed already before our collaboration. At the beginning, we provided them with an electronic keyboard, which had been lying broken somewhere in the corner of the RC [refugee centre] in [Škofja] Loka. We made an agreement with the management of the centre that it can be used by the group Nešto između. We found and purchased spare parts and repaired the keyboard, and acquired other necessary instruments and two amplifiers. So far, the group has had three concerts, because we needed quite a bit of time with the provider to find used and thus cheaper instruments. However, we are planning joint concerts with the band Dertum at the RCs in Ajdovščina, Loka... [28]

Afterwards, three concerts performed in the first part of 1996 are mentioned. These were at MKNŽ on 30 March, and two at the refugee centre in Postojna on 25 May and on 23 June.

From the KUD documents I have examined, I can conclude that Nešto između started to be treated more seriously by KUD only after the band started writing their own songs. It is very likely that the organisation was not continuously collaborating with the band, since

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**28** The instruments were most likely provided in 1995, although in KUD's application for funding from 1997, 1994 is mentioned. It is important to be careful with the claims in such applications, because they might exaggerate things in order to convince the application reviewers.

its primary occupations were elsewhere, and, as regards young refugees' music-making, it was predominantly focused on Dertum. Not that KUD was ignoring Nešto između before that, but when the band turned towards punk rock, the homology between the band's aesthetic agenda and the organisation's history of staging alternative rock music provided a certain impetus to their relations. Therefore, it is quite possible that the organisation added Nešto između to its list of priority projects only after the band took up punk rock. As I claim, the aid of this and similar organisations was indeed targeted towards refugees, but was at the same time also selective on the basis of aesthetic and cultural preferences.

Hence, KUD's activities intensified especially after the band released its demo in August 1997. In a few applications for funding from the summer of 1997, the organisation announced a series of eight concerts by Dertum and Nešto između between September and December 1997 at refugee centres and cultural venues in Slovenia. In support of the application for funds, it is also stated that an allied organisation, the Association of Tribal Communities and Medicine Men, supports Nešto između as a quality band. The fact that they were writing original rock music is emphasised. The goal of the announced concerts, it was claimed, was to enable the musicians from Dertum and Nešto između to research their own cultural riches, but also to provide opportunity for "the Bosnian, Slovenian (and possibly European) public to be involved in their concerts." Obviously, since the band split up after the abovementioned concerts at MKNŽ and in Koper in October 1997, this project remained largely unaccomplished.

## THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE ORGANISATIONS AND THE LONGEVITY OF THE SCENE

We are approaching the end of this overview of alternative (youth) culture organisations that were promoting alternative (youth) culture among Bosnian refugees, and which helped to shape the career and artistic evolution of Nešto između. Yet, there is something seriously wrong with this overview. Namely, just as the band was composed of five individuals, Amir, Dado, Mohe, Pino and Dži, there were people behind the organisations as well. Some I have mentioned, as for example a few mentors and authors of KUD's projects, but many I have not. Due to the lack of space, I will leave the important aspect of personal engagement in humanitarian projects underexplored in this essay.

However, I would like to mention one person, Gregor Belušič, because of his involvement in each and every alternative (youth) culture organisation presented in this essay. He was also involved in the career of Nešto između and was regularly recalled by the band members during our ethnographic interviews. This activist could be depicted as a person who was sewing up the different agendas and preferences of the collective agents discussed here. He was a native of Ilirska Bistrica, where he organised concerts at MKNŽ. He helped Nešto između with their instruments and later was in charge of the band's recording session. He was also active in the Association of Tribal Communities and Medicine Men. In Ljubljana, where he studied, he had a show at Radio Student dedicated to youth politics and alternative music. In Ljubljana he also became a member of Dertum,[29] and via Dertum he was involved in various activities of KUD. With this brief summary of activities I do not want to say that he was the only person who was bridging and connecting various collective agents, but I think that such personal engagements were crucial for development of refugee artists as well as for redirecting alternative (youth) organisations in Slovenia to engage more seriously with socially reflexive and artistically expressive refugee youth.

Moreover, another dimension can be highlighted by the case of this same activist: a certain endurance on the Slovenian alternative (youth) scene in regard to its basic causes with respect to youth politics as well as in regard to its specific aid work concerning refugees. Such engagements were not brief, but rather lasted for long periods of time. When by the end of the 1990s the status of Bosnian refugees in Slovenia had still not been resolved (Vrečer 2000) and when during the war in Kosovo (1998–1999) more people sought asylum in this country, youth activism (as described in this essay) was still hale and strong, which was reflected both in vividness of alternative (youth) culture and in specific aid work. I will give an example from the late 1990s, i.e. a film project called Film Gazette (Filmski vestnik), which clearly demonstrates that underground cultural and humanitarian work were intertwined and that a continuous thread of a specific type of activism can be noticed.

The Film Gazette was a project of an alternative (youth) culture organisation called the Society for the Protection of Atheistic Feelings (Društvo za zaščito ateističnih čustev), in which Belušič was involved, and was accomplished in collaboration with another

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**29** His main musical focus was the avant-garde rock band Žoambo Žoet Workestrao.

similar organisation, the Society of the Allies of Soft Landing/Consent (Društvu zaveznikov mehkega pristanka) from the town of Krško. The aim of the project was to visit various alternative (youth) venues throughout Slovenia and make video documentation and video news about their activities, and then present the films publicly. However, as the realization of the project coincided with the Kosovo refugee crisis, and, moreover, since the status of Bosnian refugees in Slovenia had not been resolved for years, the reaction of the activists was immediate. They reshaped the project by adding reportage on refugees' situation to the presentations of the youth venues. In a play on words based on the Slovenian word "vest," which means both "news" and "conscience," they renamed the Film Gazette (Filmski vestnik) as Film Bad Conscience (Filmski slabovestnik). The result was an experimental visual presentation of highly diverse activities at the youth venues and refugee centres, with a strong political message about both. In the film (Filmski slabovestnik 1999) the topics follow like this: an interview with a refugee from Kosovo; a performance on *saz* by a Kosovan musician at the refugee centre in the town of Hrastnik (from 27 June 1999); a stage performance by the ethno-rock band Blla, blla, blla from Skopje and an interview with one of its members about ethnic tensions in Macedonia; a statement on war by the Serbian rap musician Voodoo Popeye; a presentation of an anti-war artistic project by the artist Marko Pelhan; a public lecture by the sociologist Rastko Močnik on the urgent need for Slovenia to open its borders to Kosovan refugees etc. Importantly, the film also contains a presentation of a petition, addressed to the Slovenian government, demanding a quota of 70,000 refugees from Kosovo, improvement of the living conditions for Bosnian refugees in Slovenia and the practical introduction of the institution of exile and citizenship for stateless people in Slovenia. This petition was seconded by eight related alternative (youth) culture organisations.[30] In line with this essay, I should not forget to mention that Dertum appears in performance together with Kosovan refugees. The film, however, ends with a video recording of the concert by Nešto između at MKNŽ in October 1997 (see above).

The Film Gazette / Bad Conscience is a portrait of the aspirations of part of the alternative (youth) culture in 1990s Slovenia. It shows that refugees were indeed a concern among antinationalist and

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30 The organisations involved were: Society for the Protection of Atheistic Feelings, Association for Theory and Culture of Handicap, Radio Student, Society of the Allies of Soft Landing/Consent, Theatre Gromki, Cultural Artistic Society Anarchive, Youth Cultural Club of White Carniola and Cultural Society Rov Železniki.

socially reflexive youth activists for a long period of time. The latter put an effort – through film, radio shows and public events – to convince other young people to stop being apolitical and to take socially reflexive young refugees as their allies.

## WHAT'S IN THE BAND'S NAME?

Let me now return to Nešto između. Although the name of the band appeared coincidentally, when someone in conversation about it proposed: *"Let's call ourselves something in-between...,"* but could not finish his thoughts before someone else remarked: *"Yeah, Something In-Between is a very good name for a band"*, it accurately portrays its members' situation.[31] They were, like most refugees, between one stage of life, which was relatively stable and secure and was left behind at "home" and in the past, and another, which was yet to come, but expectations about it were marked by uncertainty and possible anxiety. In-betweenness was a permanent condition of waiting for "that damned supper."

However, the guys in the band were "in-between" in another sense as well. Unlike many of their fellow refugees who were stuck in a secluded refugee milieu, they were also part of a specific Slovenian alternative (youth) cultural milieu, made up of several organisations, bands, arts cliques, individuals, etc. Yet, they were included not merely as musicians, but as refugee musicians, and so gained an insider position for being a specific type of outsiders – refugees. The musical recognition in Slovenia, although of great importance for their self-esteem, was therefore always also a specific kind of recognition, which kept their social mark of being refugees alive. It was in this very sense that Amir shouted *"Thank you, we're refugees"* at the MKNŽ concert (see above). In one way or another they were never entirely insiders: they were not "just" musicians or "just" refugees, but persistently "in-between" the two statuses. Their position was ambiguous, because it was never clear whether they were recognised for being good artists or for being refugee artists, just as it was not always clear whether they

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**31** Interestingly enough, the name of the artistic wing of Nešto između, Sprung, was again discovered by chance. It was picked randomly from a dictionary, but again it represents something that the young fellows were persistently striving for and could identify with – to "spring out" from the emplaced repetition of the refugee centre (see also Kozorog 2015: 26).

were recognised as refugees or as refugees with specific qualities. Nevertheless, it was personally important for them that they were recognized in the milieu where they sought asylum.

## REFUGEES STILL, AND AGAIN

This paper was written in 2015, during the time when many refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, etc. were crossing the area of former Yugoslavia. For the present situation it can provide some knowledge about ways of treatment of refugees. For example, it shows that refugees are not a monolithic group and that they have highly individual concerns, needs and aspirations, and that besides food, food for thought and for the heart is important too. It also clearly emphasises that specific organisations, although their background is not in humanitarian aid, can be a source of profound knowledge about (treatment of) such "foods". Nevertheless, I do not want to be naive by saying that the role of alternative (youth) culture organisations in the case of the Bosnian exile can be simply transplanted to the refugee situation that we are facing in Europe today. For example, young people in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Slovenia had many things in common, such as a taste for Yugoslav rock, which is not necessarily the case with young people from other parts of the world. Nevertheless, youth nonconformism could still be recognized as an important motivating force in the effort to combat the emerging cultural misunderstandings and the fight against conformism in society.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all five members of Nešto između for the time they shared with me and for their constructive feedback. Furthermore, I am grateful to Gregor Belušič for the interview and for his suggestions on my further investigation, especially in regard to Nešto između. Many thanks also to Želko Pelicon - Peco for making my research of KUD France Prešeren's archives possible, and to Damjan Bojadžiev for acquainting me with the visual archives of the Exiles Project. I am also grateful for comments on this paper to my colleague Alenka Bartulović, who is my associate in the research of artistic outcomes of the Bosnian exile.

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