Being a medievalist in the Western Balkans, a place overcrowded with medieval documents and monuments (and competing modern explanations of such documents and monuments), can lead a scholar to feel trapped in the midst of plenty. The feeling of isolation this causes is somewhat like the social isolation and loneliness many people experience in modern cities. The feeling is only heightened by the political determinism and interference that medievalists experience in places like the Western Balkans, where almost every site and monument of medieval significance is reclaimed from different countries. The medievalist often faces a politically imposed isolation or alienation, wherein even historians of neighboring countries try to avoid cooperation. How does this politically-imposed isolation compare to the geographically imposed isolation of a place like Brasil? In other words, how does a socio-politically created “lone” medi-
evalist compare to the experience of a medievalist in a place far removed from the historical context she studies?

I have conducted a short interview with Cybele C. Almeida, a medievalist from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul in Brasil. I follow the remarks of my Brasilian colleague with a brief explanation of my experience from the Western Balkans.

I began by asking about some of the positive and negative aspects of being a medievalist in Brasil. According to Almeida:

The first point of the list is, paradoxically, positive and negative at the same time: the fact that there are few teachers/medieval history researchers in Brasil means that we have to deal with a very wide reality, in the spatial and temporal point of view. So, although most of us have an area of expertise—in my case the late Middle Ages and the urban environment—nearly all of us are required to keep updated and teach about Byzantium, Islam, and the European middle ages, or the 5th to the 15th centuries. That, on the one hand, hinders specialization—which is the tendency of our and other disciplines—but then offers a comprehensive vision and the ability to understand and make connections between these different realities.

Another major difficulty is access to specialized literature. Despite recent initiatives that are making that access easier, such as the portal of periodicals CAPES, this is even more difficult in Brasil than abroad. It is especially clear to me now, coming back from my postdoc in Germany, that the problem of access is particularly acute here. Another big problem is the difficulty in funding for research in a broad sense and, in particular, monies for conferences and other events, especially outside Brasil. This complicates the exchange of ideas and academic upgrading and makes our production something that often repeats itself, with little chance of deepening and diversification.

One positive, I think, is that our research, like the formation of our country itself, represents a pluralistic tradition. Despite the predominance of French historiography, we also
have contact with, and openness to, German, American, Iberian, and other constructions of history.

Almeida describes a situation where the medievalist is “lonely” due to not being surrounded by fellow medievalists. Now, if we compare the positive and negative sides of both situations, I personally think that the Brazilian case has many advantages over the Western Balkans. One of the positives in the former situation is that a much greater possibility exists for a medievalist to broaden his or her perspective through the cultural contacts that Almeida describes. Another extremely significant advantage is that freedom of expression compensates for the lack of immediately accessible resources. This situation, obviously, is only improving with the advent of digital technologies that make possible greater collaboration with fellow medievalists in other institutions or countries. The simple fact that my conversation with my Brazilian fellow “lone medievalist” was conducted through the internet shows that a “lone medievalist” in the 21st century can be much less lonely than even a well-placed and well-connected medievalist before the internet era. This is even true in small Western Balkan countries such as Albania, Kosovo, or Macedonia, but collective isolation, or “group loneliness,” is tangible also in Serbia or Croatia.

A recent example of the overreaction of political actors to a simple view expressed from the head of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Vladimir Kostić, may illustrate the pressure that such academics are still under even if they need to say things that seem to them to be obvious or offer facts proceeding from their research and knowledge. Kostić, in a radio interview, simply said that we must accept that Kosovo is not actually under Serbian control. After Kostić’s declaration the President of Serbia, Tomislav Nikolić, urged his dismissal, while the local media launched a campaign against Kostić because he allegedly had broken a taboo. Meanwhile over a hundred prominent public Serbian figures, including intellectuals, university professors, representatives of civil society, and journalists, have expressed
their support for Kostić and the freedom to be able to publicly declare one’s opinions.

Why it is so hard to accept and express something obvious? According to Olivera Milosavljević, Albanians are today unquestionably considered the greatest “enemies” of the Serbs. Contemporary writings about the Albanians commonly include racial stereotypes, repeated over and over again during the past one hundred years: that the Albanian people do not constitute a nation and that their lack of civil behavior precludes Albanians from establishing an independent state. It is accepted within Serbian public discourse that these sentiments, along with the opinions of non-historians, are valued highly in shaping historical perceptions. This is especially true in the case of conservative members of the Orthodox Church and the political class.¹

On the other hand, in Albania the most important voices in shaping public perceptions of history in recent years have been a novelist and a literary critic. In other words, it is not the case that the medievalist is alone; rather, he or she is surrounded by an academic environment where the last word in historiography is dictated by “intellectuals” who are not actually (or primarily) historians, but are instead known as politicians and novelists. The historical description of a region with a structure as diverse as that of the Balkans is not an easy task for historians, but surprisingly proves very easy for novelists, politicians and clerics.

In Albania, as in many other countries in southeastern Europe, the textbooks of the Communist period dedicated to teaching history were highly political. History was, among the standard school subjects, almost certainly the most extensively politically-manipulated in Communist-era schools. Historians, during the fifty years of Communist rule, were kept isolated from the historiography taking place in the non-socialist world and from exposure to a range of different approaches to his-

They became accustomed to being restricted to historical sources from eastern European countries only when undertaking the writing of new history textbooks. The content departed notably from the previously dominant Marxist-Leninist interpretation of history, but not from contemporary nationalist views, many of which remain still unchallenged and unchanged in the present day.

Democratic developments in the field of history teaching had their impact, however: in the design of the new history curriculum, in new history textbooks based on standards issued by the Council of Europe and other European organizations, and through changes to the training of history teachers. The philosophy upon which the design of the Albanian history curriculum is based calls for the building of bridges between peoples, nations, and those of differing cultural backgrounds, to the end of eliminating misunderstanding and prejudices between peoples.

The competing historical narratives are very often seen as a major problem in the mutual perception of people that share a difficult past. Yet there are bilateral projects and mixed committees between Turkey and Kosovo, between Greece and Albania, etc., set up by governments with the goal of revising the way these neighbors are seen. These bilateral committees mainly deal with two important periods: the medieval pre-Ottoman period and the post-Ottoman period.

These initiatives (particularly one organized between the Ministry of Education and Sport in Albania and the Ministry of Education in Greece) and their focus on the revision of history textbooks for the eradication of prejudices with respect to nationality, religion, etc., has given rise to a public debate, in which historians, politicians, history teachers, education specialists,

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2 However, over a hundred Albanian intellectuals, among them the Albanian writer Ismail Kadare, signed a “Petition against the review of history under the supervision of Turkish state authorities” in March 2013.

and laypeople have been involved. Greek participants in this debate, principally parliamentarians in this instance, have called for the reestablishment of the Albanian/Greek Committee, which was set up in 2004 to revise the history textbooks of both countries. Many Albanian historians, however, reject the idea of shaping history in accordance with the wishes of politicians in both countries as well as the politicization of history textbooks. They argue that the revision of history textbooks should happen only as a result of bringing to light new historical sources.

I totally agree with Almeida that her situation makes participation in conferences, particularly international conferences, much more difficult and considerably more expensive than in Europe. But in the case of the Western Balkans, conferences and other academic gatherings are not meant to involve historians from neighboring countries. Generally, if we hear about some conference or research project that includes historians from different countries of the region, it is almost always due to European initiatives about fostering the dialogue between peoples of the region. Their impact, therefore, like their origin, is much less tangible in the academic climate than would have been similar projects originating from the countries’ academic representatives themselves.

To conclude, I think that although it seems strange, a lone medievalist might be less lonely in a country like Brasil that lacks a European medieval past than in countries where the lone medievalist is expected to have a certain view shaped from and conforming to his or her society’s modern viewpoints. These views, mainly nationalist in origin and nature, confine the historian, leaving no space for new ideas and approaches. As a medievalist you simply need to find new ways to stress the same old views, or new approaches to reinforce the same ideas, or new methods to reach the same conclusions repeated over and over for decades. Even the era of the internet has yet to soften this harsh academic environment, while in the case of Brasil access to technologies seems to be working every day to better ease the “loneliness” of the medievalist.