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WOMEN AND CULTURAL GHETTO: THE BALKANS PERSPECTIVES

Abstract: This paper explores the status of women- refugees belonging to families who immigrated to Vojvodina from Croatia. We discuss the influence of these women in preserving their cultural model and the possible distance in relation to the native population in Vojvodina. Although both the natives and the newcomers belong to the Serbian majority, there are considerable cultural differences among them. For instance, the women from immigrant families have, on average, lower levels of education and they are more inclined to maintain inter-group cohesion. These women are the transmitters of the traditional behavior/way of thinking but at the same time, they also transmit newly created legends about harmonious and happy way of life in their native land. Processes of globalizations, or multicultural communications, do not have an effect on their view of life, nor do they affect the relationships within their families: this is due to the partially self-imposed segregation of the newcomers, by which the newcomers are able to preserve and replicate their cultural model in a new environment

Key words: multiculturalism, women, refugees, Vojvodina

Multiculturalism in South-East Europe

The current question of multiculturalism today is, in fact, the question of communication between members of different cultures. The defying concept of culture as "ours"/"foreign" in national/ethnic sense, according to which all "others" are the ones that do not belong to "our" ethnic/national group (in spite the fact that "others" may live on the same territory and use the same language as "our" group does) derives from Romanticism and its ideas on "national states". This concept was carried out more or less successfully during the 19th century, surviving even today in the notion of multiculturalism as defined by the European Union. That is, preservation of cultural/linguistic enclaves with the status of national minorities within European states directly develops from Romanticists' inseparably association/equalization of state and nation. And although this romanticists' association of population/nation and culture was drastically misused not only in Germany during the III Reich but also in the Balkans happenings in all through 1990's (Roth 1998), it is still explicitly present in European interpretation of multiculturalism, especially in Eastern European countries. This is the result of consisted application of ideas taken over from the German school of thought under which influence these states were formed in the 19th century; also, as a consequence of historical circumstances[1], these states in general fall short of a critical attitude regarding the relationships between cultures and nations.

In the Balkans, under the influence of Western science and current politics, the notion of multiculturalism includes implicitly the relationship between different national cultures; thus, the existence of a variety of diverse cultural models within one and the same national culture is being ignored. Namely, within the culture that is defined as "Serbian", there are a number of different cultural models, whose diversity is distinctive and important only from the standpoint of the cultural majority in Serbia, but totally negligible when observed from the perspective of global, Central European or world cultures.

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[1] Maintaining a national discourse during communist period is not a characteristic only for the former Yugoslavia, but common for all other countries of the eastern Block. Bulgarian example analyzed in Balikci 1998.

Cultural communications in the Balkans

A successful communication between different cultural models represents a great challenge - cultures in general "build" into people a certain way of thinking, viewpoints, way of listening and interpretation of uttered. Identical words could have (and do have) different meanings for people of different cultures in spite of that they could speak "the same language". Insomuch as these cultural models are similar to each other, it is more difficult to define precisely potential conflict-points of misapprehension/clash and act preventively upon. Understanding and cooperation between members of different cultural models, understood in wider territorial, national and global environments, are possible only if an efficient mechanism exists that would help to overcome in-cultures conflict (a potentially possible conflict that exists in every multicultural, that is, every society). Nevertheless, in order to create such a mechanism, it is necessary to define all levels of potential cultural models that participate in a relationship, possible representatives of certain models, ways of their reproduction and probable points of conflict/misapprehension.

Most definitions of culture are based, explicitly or implicitly, on its contents - on easily observable and describable phenomena. Such a content (text) implies various cultural elements: language, alphabet, religion, kinship relations, dress, esthetics, ideal patterns of thinking and behavior, concept of time, concept of universe... In South-Eastern Europe, cultural/national identities were constructed on the basis of a relatively arbitrary choice of cultural content-elements, dictated by the romanticized ideology and omnipresent everyday politics. During the two past centuries of the Balkans history, these identities were redesigned in order to fit the given, actual political view on relationship between "national" cultures/nations. If we are to accept the definition of multiculturalism as a relationship of a number of "national" cultures from the viewpoint of Romanticism, then we have to define cultures by their language, and, as in the case of the former Yugoslavia, by their religion. However, right from the beginning, we are faced with a problem. Within the so-called "Serbian" culture, defined by its religion and language, there are a number of diverse cultural models, which differ, objectively, by various content-elements: social organization (which could be territorial or genus in traditional and /or open in recent city settlements), ideal patterns of behavior and viewpoint, economy, material culture (settlements, cuisine, dress...)... At the same time, there are quite a number of the nation-members who do not consider themselves religiously and thus culturally determined or who do not accept "identification" based on the religion, and therefore they are left out of the defined "national" culture. On the other hand, the spoken language is common to Serbs, Croatians, Montenegrins and Muslims, in spite of many political efforts invested in its division and separation; consequently, the language cannot have a distinctive function in regard to other national groups/cultures. So, defining culture only by its contents poses several questions: which cultural elements are to be chosen over others? And which elements could serve as distinctive cultural markers? What about the nation-members who do not accept such markers as a measure of their own national/cultural identification/identity? In multinational environments, such as Vojvodina, and most of the Balkans (as well as most of the SE Europe), the same actual cultural content/elements are exhibit simultaneously by many if not all members of the various national groups. As a result, we are able to observe the same traditional type of house and its surroundings among Serbs, Hungarians and Slovaks in Vojvodina, and also among Serbs and Croats in Lika, Banija and Kordun, Serbs and Vlahs in eastern Serbia, Serbs and Muslims in Sandzak, Serbs, Bulgarians and Macedonians in the central zone of the Balkans. Also, these groups share the same diet (except for some differences related to religious taboos), economy

and many other cultural elements including a few which are not of a Christian origin. Therefore, in bi/multilingual environments, spoken language serves as a distinctive cultural marker (this term is used because in all the Balkans cultures cultural/ethnic identity is not defined per se, but as a difference in regards to others - the accent is hence on differences, not on possible characteristic of identity per se), which represents the foundational element of identification - the one which is given by birth while a religion is the outcome. In monolingual but bi/multinational environments, religion appears to be the foundational marker, and at least among Serbian groups, the outcome marker becomes alphabet: "*be a Serb therefore write Cyrillic*".

Cultural context

A number of problems come up when we define cultural models based only on their content - for example, the overlapping of content' elements. In order to determine and define multiculturalism, we have to include a definition of cultural models based on their level of context. What is meant by "a context of culture"? In this sense, these are the matters within a given culture - which go without saying: the issues implicitly included in everyday verbal messages and some other elements of cultural contents. In order to avoid misunderstandings and misreading between cultures, a message should be created in one cultural model and but should be intelligible to a receiver from another cultural model. However, cultural preferences of both sender and receiver include not only what is being said, but also a certain level of what goes without saying, that is, context. The level of importance of a context depends on a cultural model. Among *high-context* cultures with words are not the only message carriers: every spoken information carries along many implicit inclusions, prescribed by a given cultural model. For instance, one banal example: during a conversation a propos food preparation with a friend of mine who is not a native but lives in Vojvodina for the last 20 years, I was very confused when I learned that she makes potato-soup or potato-stew with meat. According to my, Vojvodina's native point of view - and this is the cultural model I was brought up in - it is clearly known what is meant by potato soup/stew: a meal made of potatoes, without meat. It is obvious that such a context does not exist in other environments but the term refers to a meal made of potatoes and meat. My "double insider" relation (Naumovic 1998, defined as 1A+2A+3B - I belong to the group, I do my best for the group, but I do not consider it deprived of its rights, accused or less valued) made possible for me to grasp and recognize, based on my own experience, a misunderstanding created by the cultural context. But, what happens when someone who is not trained to recognize misunderstanding finds himself in a similar situation? What happens when a misunderstanding involves more serious matters than a cuisine tradition? Misunderstandings created by a cultural context model appear on all levels but, in distinction from my own example, could cause serious intra-group conflicts. The *high-context* cultures have, as a rule: hidden and implicit messages, closed/group coded messages, pronounced non-verbal coding, repressed reactions, a distance between inter/intra group, strong in-group connection and high levels of group belongings/loyalty. For these reasons, every misunderstanding/ misinterpretation between members of the *high-context* cultural models and people from different (content or context) cultural models is experienced as an attack to a group as a whole.

All cultural models of SE Europe belong to the *high-context* cultures - moreover, many traditional models in rural and inaccessible areas that lasted until the end of 20th century have markedly higher cultural context than models developed in towns and cities. In Vojvodina, the situation is even more complicated because the level of context has progressively appeared after every colonization - after WW I and II, in the 1970's and Maspok, and especially during the wars

in the 1990's. The 1990's wars have created more than three million refugees and displaced persons, out of which women and children make the most part. As a rule, the refugee-camps attended to the needs of divided (by war and displacement) families, whose members gradually managed to find each other again over the years, and started a new life in a new environment. A special case represents a wave of Kninska Krajina whole family-refugees, who were relocated in August 1995; they lost almost everything and had no personal belongings. Because of their huge number, it was impossible to organize their housing so they were sent to stay with relatives, friends or even completely unknown people.

Data

During the war years (1991-1995), Vojvodina went through huge, dramatic demographic changes: true, the newcomers were pure Serbs, but from many different cultural models, typical for the Balkan Peninsula, that is, the area of the former Yugoslavia: Dinaric model (Dalmatian Zagora, Lika, Banija, Kordun, which today belong to Croatia, and Bosnia), central-Balkans area model, and Pannonian model (Slavonija, nowdays a Croatian territory). Vojvodina was already a multiethnic area, which implicitly included high levels of intercultural communications and thus an area that could accept the newcomers easily. After almost 10 years, however, it is evident that a high level of group segregation exists, and not only regarding the relationship of the natives/newcomers, but also among the individual newcomer groups.

The data, based on a research on intercultural relations in the Stara Pazova county[2] district in 2000-2003, clearly supports this observation; the research includes the natives: Serbs, Croatians, Slovaks and Roma and the newcomers from the above mentioned models. In 1991, this county district had 30.000 inhabitants; an influx of about 13.000 refugees during the 1990's wars changed the demographics, while few hundreds of Croatians moved to Croatia or Western Europe.

A process of globalization or multicultural communication in the new multiethnic/multicultural environment did not effect the newcomers' point of view very much. Today, all newcomer-groups live in partially self-imposed isolation, which in turn makes possible to maintain and reproduce the old, brought-in cultural model in their new environment. The newcomer/refugee female population had and still has the key role in the permanent restoration of the cultural model.

The women from the newcomer-families have, on average, lower levels of education when compared to their males. According to statistical data from 2003, approximately 25% of the Serbian population is not literate; women make up about 80% of the total. The newcomers fit perfectly into the picture. A questionnaire, given by Red Cross in 2003, on social and health status of the refugees relocated from 1991-1995 from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, provides the following data. The sample included 201 females aged 18 and over and 194 males aged 18 and over.

Education	College		High school		Elementary school		No schooling	
	No	% App.	No	% App.	No	% App.	No	% App.
Women	10	5	67	33,5	27	13,5	97	48,5
Men	7	3,5	121	62,5	23	12	43	22

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[2]. Stara Pazova is located in the province of Vojvodina, Eastern Srem County, around 30 km north of Belgrade.

The data show that the women's level of education is considerably lower than of the males, that is, almost half of the women do not have even elementary school. 50% of these women are, in fact, illiterate, although many can read newspapers and watch television/read titles. It follows that the usage of alphabet is not a national distinctive feature - out of 474 questionnaires only 92 (19,4%) were filled in Cyrillic, even the questionnaire itself was printed in Cyrillic letters. Further interviews with the newcomers revealed that they consider Cyrillic as a distinctive ethnic marker; at least they did so - in areas where they came from. They also stated that they actually used Latin alphabet more, in everyday life; they were in a situation where there was no need to emphasize ethnicity and the question of cultural/ethnic preference was absent. This situation resulted in that their learned behavior took over of their wanted/projected behavior. In their new environment, this particular way of emphasizing the ethnic background is irrelevant, since the majority of population is also Serbian.

Group Identity

In the new environment, the prime story for these people became not an ethnic distinction, but a group distinction in relation to all other groups (the natives and newcomers from all other areas) regardless of their ethnic background. A psychological connection with the land, one's property, one's house surroundings considered sacred and through many generations thought of as a part of one's family - are the issues that make the basis of conscious and unconscious of every Balkans farmer/peasant (of all nations). One's land is not just a place for hard work or a place for living, a connection with it carries a cultural, religious, historical and a bio-genetic component A loss of one's home and land became so a synonym for ethnic identity loss, because the understanding of a space and land and the symbolic connection with them were an integral part of any group and individual identities. The leading desire of all the refugees, when they first came to Vojvodina, was to return to their native land, although they sensed that their homecoming would be a very difficult undertaking or close to impossible. A decade later, they state that they want to remain where they are, and they also want their children to remain in Vojvodina in order to build their lives there. However, they do not feel like an integrated part of the new environment: instead of their lost identity, they built a new one, based on group membership that makes it very group-oriented. The basis of this new identity is kinship relation/connection, be it a blood or extended, social kinship; the relation includes also an emotional tie with their homeland since the space over there (environmentally and geographically) was kinship-organized. This particular geographical organization was impossible to fully re-create in the new environment (although many areas have witnessed a creation of totally new streets and quarters, organized by kinship principle), but this was compensated by creating a social space that almost totally excluded non-group members.

A new life: the women and their new environment

In the native homeland, old people tended to stay in villages while their children went to big cities, in search for jobs and better life, and consequently formed their own families. However, in the new environment, the reunited families became multigenerational again, even in cases where, in their homeland, children already lived apart from their parents. In the homeland, the connections between generations and to one's home were always strong, even though adult children or married brothers did not live under the same roof. Such an economic situation, as in other parts of the Balkans, revived a traditional structure of the family co-operational community. Within these reunited families, traditional male-female roles became important

again: males were engaged in public and females in private spheres only. The clearest indicator of such a relation is an interest in politics, which in Serbia, after the breakdown of communism, became everyday frame for living and thinking, including emotional and every other engagement. The refugees took part in this activity only partially: the women are not interested in politics, do not perceive any differences among various political parties or their respective leaders, especially do not see any differences in their programs. Their political orientations is an orientation of the males from their homes, and completely match up the patriarchal cultural context - women dealing with private sphere only, which defines both their interest and knowledge.

Out of 200 women included in the research, only 31 is employed full time, 8 is employed part-time, while all the rest are housewives - women who take care of their homes and families. In fact, all of these women work outside their homes from time to time, but do not consider this work as their actual profession - they do it just because they need an extra money to support their families. Their sole interest is in house-chores that include house-making, cooking, taking care of their children and socializing with female relatives and friends, who are also unemployed, and in 99% cases relocated from the same cultural area, most often from the same village.

When employed, these women work in gray economy, which suits them better, according to their own opinion, since they are paid more in this way. They do not have pension/health insurance, but they are not concerned or worried by this fact at all: the most important thing is to survive until tomorrow. However, all agree that an employment in state companies is something that guarantees safety and certain security, even being a case of government-financed, low-budget institutions with low salaries. This general attitude corresponds with the belief inherited from the period of communism - that government-operated companies guarantee security and safety for the rest of your life since it is practically impossible to get fired from a such company - even today, in spite that the actual salaries could be months late. Because of this belief, these women are willing to accept jobs well bellow their actual qualifications: in a kindergarten in Novi Banovci, several of these women with mid or even higher education levels work as cleaning women. Most of the time, the women work in groups given that their jobs (agriculture field work, crafts and textile industry) are set up by their husbands, relatives or family friends from their native area. So, 5-10 of these women in a group that work on the same job are, as a rule, related (by blood or marriage) thus their conversations during working hours on a monotonous job, are a repetition of conversations that they would normally have while taking their daily coffee or while baby-sitting during hanging out in their family circle.

The in-group cohesion of these women, maintained by their everyday contact and strengthened by the knitted relationship of their inner social, economic but also symbolic bonds, made these refugees better adapted in the new environment They managed to build their houses through *moba,* a special type of voluntarily, non-paid work-help from relatives and friends; they found their jobs and employment with the help of their relatives or countrymen who came to the area earlier ... and little by little, they managed to start a new life. At the same time, the refugees were well aware that the support of their group was crucial for their survival and maybe the only option for improvement of their bitter situation. This kind of awareness was maintained by the women, who took the responsibility not only in traditional roles and jobs, but also in many other duties that sprang from their losses and traumas - the kind of responsibilities that conditioned a possibility to reconstruct their lives in a new environment. Even in the most difficult moments of their lives, these women managed to preserve many pieces of their material culture - a piece of traditional dress, photo of their home and family members that became not only very important

elements of symbolic reconstruction of an individual and group identity, but also the elements of a family reconstruction. Older members of the group have a very special place in this process, especially old women-grandmothers, who actively participated in child rearing and socialization, transmitting to them the traditional cultural values. They are the main transmitters of the traditional thinking/behavior, but also of newly made legends, created during their refugee-time: the legends that talk about happy, safe and rich life in their homeland.

The relocation to the new environment, experienced as foreign and thus antagonistic, without cash and perspective, has left a deep trace. For example, the life they had in their homeland was idealized by most of these people, colored by sweet memories and filled with the fake sense of security and economic stability, even though their real life situation was far harsher than they want to remember. Namely, most of the refugees in this sample are from Bukovica and Kninska Krajina (nowdays Croatia), and these regions were in the 1980's still extremely poor, undeveloped agricultural areas. The majority of males used to work in Knin or Zadar; there were some families who besides their village home owned an apartment or a house at the seashore, where they were engaged in tourism as an additional business. Still, most have lived from stockbreeding, cutting woods or in working in a nearby factory. A lasting emigration to Western Europe of work-capable males from the region also affected the low-industry potential of the region; basically only women and children stayed "at home". During the years after their relocation to Vojvodina, these people created an idealized image of the life they had in their homeland. While the men talked about their military and war experiences, the women talked about their former life, in the homeland. Such stories were re-told almost ceremonially, on a daily basis, and they correspond with the noted behavior of refugees in other areas. These narratives represent a substitute for lost identity and a ritual link with anyone else in a similar position. A special importance was given to the narratives that tell about abandoned homes, which, during the years, advanced from regular houses to castles from fairytales—the dream that will never come true.

Another adaptation that these people had to face was - a change of climate and natural environment. A Mediterranean-mountain climate of their homeland was replaced with harsh continental climate, with long, cold winters and hot, dry summers. Instead of the seaside, water, mountains, rocks and woods, the new life begun at lowland, on a black-earth soil that most of them have never seen before. Heavy autumn rain and mud were, for the most, a totally new experience - and many have never adjusted or accepted these new conditions. The majority of women complain, even today, of a sense of coldness during most of the year, while they experience summer as too hot and almost impossible for breathing. Their memory erased the most part of what was ugly in their homeland, or difficult after the wars, and left an ideal image of their homes, intact nature, clear air, taste of baby-lambs that cannot be found again. A seducing image impossible.

Later on, after the war, the borders have opened up, and the women were the first to grasp their feelings, painfully aware they are not coming home, ever, even if their property, burned or destroyed, is to be returned to them. In the new environment, they have built new homes, their husbands managed to find jobs, their children found friends so their possible homecoming would mean breaking apart of already fragile base of their new life. Nevertheless, some of these women travel a few times per year to their native area, preserving in this way, a bond with their former identity but without even trying to get out of the enchanted in-group viewpoint. The group, primarily its inheritance, defines them in the same way they rebuilt the group with old and new narratives on origin.

Future Perspectives

Only when children born in the new area grow up, make friends and marry into another ethnic group or another cultural model, the segregation and ghetto the refugees live in will start to disappear. Possible relationships outside their group could become equally important as their group-ones, and their individual identity would rely less on the group. In this way, a subsequent generation could become an integral part of the Balkans cultural variety, without loss, at the same time, of their own identity. The ones who survived wars and became refugees will remain forever inclined to their in-group relationships, thanks to which they managed to survive. Their ghetto was, in fact, their only possibility for survival.

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