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Discursive Construction of "Others": The Serbian Community in Southeast Kosovo in the Post-War Context *

This paper briefly discusses method and theory and results of multi-sited field research of the Serbian community in southeast Kosovo. The paper represents a reduced version of much larger study, to follow subsequently, on relation between ethnic and other forms of collective identity of the Serbian community in southeast Kosovo in the post-war context.

Key words:

Serbs, Kosovo, field research, the post-war context, discourse, identity, identification, ethnic identity, protectorate

I started my field research of the Serbian community in southeast Kosovo (a part of the larger area known as Kosovo Pomoravlje) in 2003, as a part of ethno-linguistic project *Research on Slavic languages in Kosovo and Metohia* run by Institute of Serbian Language SASA, supported by UNESCO. The project assumed recording of audio- material in Kosovo and among internally displaced people in Serbia who, by a forced migration, left Kosovo in 1999 (in collective centers and private accommodation). The primary goal of the project was to record language situation in multi-ethnic and multi-confessional environment, and war and post-war migrations and later on to create a sound archive. Within this project, I have set up my research among the displaced people from southeast Kosovo in Smederevo and in Vranje, and later on among two collective centers in Vranjska Banja. In the same year, I spent a week in Vitina enclave in Kosovo. The Serbian community of the southeast Kosovo and problems associated with the post-war discourse appeared me to as interesting, valid, inspirational and scientifically relevant and important hence I decided to dedicate the next several years to studies about these issues. Consequently, from the end of 2003, I have continued my re-

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search on these topics within the existing projects of Institute of Ethnography, SASA.

In the next several years, I performed my research among the displaced from southeast Kosovo area in Vranje and Vranjska Banja. Also, in 2005 *in situ* at Vitina enclave, which also included the villages of Vrbovac, Grnčar, Binač, Klokot and Mogila. I visited Letnica, a village on the border with Macedonia, twice. The major part of the research was performed in 2006, when I visited Kosovo several times. I have researched Gnjilane regional centre, as well as the villages of Šilovo, Gornje Kusce, Gornji Livoč, Parteš, Pašjane, and I have visited Draganac village.¹

The fieldwork was performed in several localities: two in southeast Kosovo (Gnjilane and the surroundings and Vitina enclave), the displaced individuals in Serbia (Smederevo, a city with the greatest concentration of people originated in Kosovo_Pomoravlje, then in Vranje, and Vranjska Banja), but also the inhabitants of Vranje, the city where I have been doing my research for many consecutive years. Since 1999, due to the proximity of Kosovo, the subject of ethno-nationality has become a hot and omnipresent topic for Vranje: in everyday conversations, graffiti, plans for future... In addition, the inhabitants of southeast Kosovo gravitate towards Vranje since it's the closest bigger city in Serbia (administrative errands, medical procedures, shopping...); van-transport is available on a daily basis between Vranje and the majority of villages in Kosovo Pomoravlje. Multi-sited field research (Marcus, 1995) was needed since the mentioned locations are connected in such a way they make a unit. The research community is scattered, one part remained in Kosovo and the other migrated to Serbia, while in reality the community is present in both places at the same time. In order to understand better the general social processes and relations within the community and its surroundings, it was necessary to structure the research so that each diverse part of the community would be covered as well as lives and attitudes of Vranje inhabitants since they interact in various ways. The field localities were set as a network of localities (Hannerz 2003, 21, 25).

The time span of the research covered the period 2003–2006. I have maintained contact with several of my informants though, which allowed me to meet them at various later occasions in both Vranje and Belgrade, when they attended medical treatments or errands, and some of them have been my guests. I still do a follow up of the researched group.

I decided to study the members of the Serbian community in southeast Kosovo partially due to the fact that my native language idiom is close to their idiom (Prizren-south Morava type within Prizren-Timok dialect zone, see Ivić [1956]

¹ The attached map allows a detailed view of the settlements in southeast Kosovo. The informants were mostly born in places I was unable to visit during the research but they mention those places in their accounts (as a place of nativity, gathering place on certain occasions, event places and so on).

1985) hence this allowed a deeper understanding of their accounts and facilitated emic perspective.



Methodology of my research was of qualitative nature, realized as observance with participation. I have tried to attend holiday celebrations, saint's day festivities, weddings and similar important events but also everyday interactions within the community. I was also interested in the interaction of the community and its surroundings. In my efforts to understand the complex social reality, using available methodological and analytical means, I have mixed approaches depending on a given situation: in depth, unstructured interviews, informal conversations, observance with participation, use of visual sources (photographs, video-recording) and so on. Identification processes were studied at the levels of discourse, ritual and everyday practice. Linking these levels was required since research often shows a discrepancy between what the informants say and what they actually do. In identifying the processes of research, narrative sources appear as insufficient; therefore, it is necessary to account for discourse practices as well as for actual interactions within particular social context (Čapo Žmegač 2002, 46, 266–267). Due to the limited number of days of fieldwork in Kosovo, limited freedom of movement and other problems associated with the post-war fieldwork, then additionally because of the type of project from 2003, as well as chosen method and theory concepts, the material I based this paper on (as an announcement of a larger study), is mostly of narrative character while analysis is directed towards discourse. Diversity of attitudes and voices within the community are presented in longer segments of the transcribed accounts and conversations, analyzed later on by *discourse analysis*, in a form adjusted to ethnographic research. Albeit the focus of humanistic sciences is increasingly becoming directed to discourse, the term itself is still unclear, jagged and dilatable. Thus, an analysis of discourse carries a discipline's sign mark. In this paper, the discourse is contextualized and determined as a form of societal practice, with account being a basic unit.

Field research of sensitive and politically burdened context places in the forefront ethical issues (Sluka 1995, 285, 282), creating at the same time a problem of multiple, often opposed responsibilities for the researcher (Čapo Žmegač 2006, 216). During my fieldwork, I was interested in a subjective dimension of the conflict and life under protectorate, and given that my ethnicity is the same as of the researched, I devotedly inquired about soft spots of cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 1997). All the time, even during the paper creation, I was aware that public announcement of the acquired insights could jeopardize the community, especially so being a minority one with a sensitive status which could become easily even more vulnerable (Prelić 2009, 49–50). In order to protect my informants, I tried to be selective regarding the data, but this of course didn't help the community become less vulnerable. In addition, the responsibility towards the profession and the scientific community I belong to, obliged me to persevere in an effort to attain a balance between the opposed responsibilities and to provide a clear image zoomed by the research. As argued by Jasna Čapo Žmegač (2006, 229), the status of researcher living in the same society as the researched is particularly delicate, more so in situations when the researcher publishes papers dealing with contemporary subjects with political implications (cf. Nedeljković 2008).

In June 1999, United Nations established a protectorate in Kosovo. In the informants discourse, the protectorate is marked as a period with liminal attributes: a difficult, undefined and unspecified state, when a person is *neither there nor here*, incapable of making any long term plans. In every conversation, the main theme became the question accompanied by a personal feeling of vulnerability: to stay in Kosovo or to move to Serbia. Burdened by the post-war everyday life troubles and expecting the final solution of Kosovo status, the informants drew a sharp line in chronology: pre – 1999 and post – 1999, dividing so the time into “our” and “their”. Generally, the 1990’s, when Kosovo was under control of the Belgrade regime, are marked as “our time”, while the period after 1999 – as “their time” (that is, Albanian). Previously multi-ethnic Kosovo from 1999 becomes inhabited by Albanians exclusively. The Serbs are a minority, concentrated in small enclaves. Many other ethnic, religious and linguistic groups are displaced or (forcefully) assimilated.

In a situation of deeply changed context from 1999 and the introduction of international protectorate, the research was aimed at revealing the relationship between ethnic and other forms of identifications (religious, regional, local, gender etc.) within the Serbian community in southeast Kosovo. The focus was placed on ethnic and other collective identities constructions within the discourse of the community, seen in many aspects but most significantly, in discursive creation of *others*. Kosovo was populated by many significant *others*, close or distant, as well as by those who could at the same time, be affiliated with both categories. Identity discourses about *other/others* represent a negative in regards to formation, shaping and expressions of various and leveled discourses of self-identification.²

Older ethnographic literature and research carried out in the period immediately prior to the outbreak of the conflict point out that Kosovo has had a long history of co-existences and overcoming of ethnic and religious boundaries (Duijzingis 2000), that is, in the past few centuries, the Kosovo area was multiethnic, multi confessional and multilingual (Mladenović 2004, 245). Considering its frontier position, groups boundaries are often fluid and identities uncertain, ambivalent and situational (Duijzingis 2000, 24). Kosovo is characterized by pronounced regional and local identities and hybrid cultural practice. In the last decades of 20th century, ethnic identification has become more relevant than the other categories of membership. Ethnic identity, as shown by numerous studies, becomes even more important in times of crisis and changes, in uncertain periods and situations subserving a creation of vulnerable, endangered borders (Eriksen [1993] 2002, 99).

In accordance with the new situation, within the Serbian community, *others* are being constructed on intra- and inter-ethnic levels. Intra-ethnic discourses of the Serbian community members shape the colonists, so-called Šops [Shops], then inhabitants of Serbia with whom they have intensified the contact from 1999, as

² Maria Todorova discusses application of *other* and *otherness* in the Balkans studies and points out to the expression of fashionable usage, controversial and epistemological difficulties in the application (Todorova 2010, 7, 77–90). She suggests we should think more about movement, fluidity, flow among what in a moment appear as “other” and in the next becomes “self” and *vice versa* (ibid, 90).

well as so-called *Serbian Gypsies*. Inter-ethnic discourse is reserved for Albanians, Roma, Croats from Letnica and surrounding villages, as well as for officers of international administration (within which the Serbian community diversifies numerous *others*). An external definition, categorization is an important dimension of the inner definition; they are mutually connected and dependent (Dženkins [1997] 2001, 101). Focusing on external definition, that is, on “neighboring discourse” (Sikimić 2004, 259, 267–274; Sikimić 2005; cf. Sikimić 2008) allows a deeper insight into process dynamic of social shaping of identity in the region characterized by a borderline position. During the research, I was able to perceive inter-group perceptions and determinations only within the Serbian community, among old inhabitants and colonists, Kosovo Serbs and those living on the territory of Serbia. I discuss other groups only through a perspective of external definitions of the members of Serbian community. For a researcher from Serbia, a research in the Albanian community would be a “mission impossible”.

The Serbian community in southeast Kosovo was made out of those who determined themselves as autochthonous population, and on the other side – also colonists. Within the colonists, there were other lines of division (Montenegrins, Herzegovinians, etc). From 1912, and after Kosovo incorporation into Kingdom of Serbia, processes of agrarian reforms and population settling had started. During World War I, there was a cessation of the process of settling, but it was continued after 1918 along with agrarian reform as a means of national strategy. The researched area was mostly settled by population of southeast Serbia (from the mountain areas around Vranje), pejoratively denoted by the old inhabitants as “Šops” (and not so “real” Serbs). On the other hand, the colonists had perceived certain cultural practices of the old inhabitants as similar to Albanian. The old inhabitants and colonists, albeit equal regarding ethnicity, religion, language and dialect but with a different local speech, had lived as two endogamous groups. The colonists, considering the fact that they were not accepted by the old inhabitants, and under the pressure of Albanians in whose villages they were settled, started leaving Kosovo ever since 1960’s. At the time of our research, only a small number of colonist descendants who had married into the older inhabitants remained. Distinctive identities of the two groups still remain intact, being based on interpretations of local and regional differences (Zlatanović 2004; Zlatanović 2008; Zlatanović 2008a).

From June 1999, a lot of the Serbs from Kosovo moved to Serbia, in a process that had begun considerably earlier. The families that stayed in Kosovo were trying to secure themselves by buying real estate in Serbia, even not valuable lots were considered. Those who moved to Serbia, describe their lives as difficult not only due to lack of employment possibilities but also because the Serbs from Serbia show lack of empathy for their respective destiny. Differences in lifestyle and system of values (pronounced traditionalism of the Serbian family from Kosovo, high fertility, dialect) contribute to the fact that the inhabitants of Serbia view them as similar to Albanians. The Kosovo Serbs feel hurt by this characterization since they – as argued – have run away from Albanians. They perceive themselves as guardians of the Serbian customs and religion. The Serbian way of life is experienced as egoistic, based exclusively on personal interests. The Serbs from Kosovo

and Albanians are similar in ways they organize their lives, while language and Orthodox Christianity are what the Serbs from Kosovo and Serbs from other regions have in common. Due to the identity constructed along the lines of the frontier position of Kosovo, they are not accepted by the Kosovo Albanians as much as they are not accepted by the inhabitants of Serbia. They, hence, remain in a gap: *both there and here* and/or *neither there nor here*.³

The community of the so-called *Serbian Gypsies*,⁴ in Mogila and Klokot villages (in Vitina enclave) is a paradigmatic example of ethnic identity flexibility, its situational dependence and proneness to negotiation. The *Serbian Gypsies* declare themselves as Serbs, they have Serbian first and last names, they are Orthodox, celebrate Saint Patron's day, speak Serbian language even within the group, and even their skin color does not represent an ethnic boundary since the Serbs describe them as "white". Nevertheless, the border between this group and the Serbs remains, even though it is a porous one. Ever since 1999, the Serbs, being a minority, started gradually accepting the fact that the group was working on its assimilation and identity transformation. An informant argued: "When there are no Serbs around, they are good enough", additionally explaining troubled times forced him to accept the *Serbian Gypsies*. Albeit that within the Serbian community, the *Serbian Gypsies* are still denied their identity, and still remain associated with "Gypsy" identity, thanks to the same confession there are even some mixed marriages. In the enclave everyday reality, ethnic identity appears more open to negotiation processes than it is the case in some other areas (Zlatanović 2007, 642–643).

The framework of intra-ethnic discursive creation of *other* points out to how the community perceives itself and based on which elements it constructs its different identities diverse ways of the identity. Even though all the mentioned groups (autochthonous Serbian population in Kosovo, the colonists, so-called *Serbian Gypsies* and inhabitants of Serbia) share the same ethnic membership, in their external definition, the membership is questioned and in some ways, denied. Ethnic identity represents a social construction but formed in such a way that it acquires primordial attributes, ordinary people experience it in essential and primordial sense (Prelić 2003, 279, 281). The external determination of the members of mentioned groups frequently lack primordial devotion (a sense of communion and solidarity, based on blood relatedness belief, common background etc.).

The members of Serbian community in southeast Kosovo in inter-ethnic relations determine as *others* members of Kosovo Croats, Albanians, Roma but also representatives of international administration (which itself is a subject for a whole new study).

The Kosovo Croats lived in the villages of Letnica, Šašare, Vrnez and Vrnakovolo in Vitina municipality. In the complex, pre-war circumstances in 1992, finding themselves between two antagonistic sides, they began to leave their villag-

³ The situation of the Kosovo Serbs in Serbia is discussed also by Nedeljković 2008, 50–52.

⁴ The term *Serbian Gypsies* is used throughout this article conditionally, since it is an exonym.

es and flee for Croatia. In 1999, another large group of Croatians left Kosovo. At the time of my research, they were very few in numbers in Letnica village. In the discourse of the Serbian community members, Croatians are seen as close *others*. The inhabitants of the Serbian villages Grnčar and Vrbovac were in many ways associated with Letnica and the Croatians, called in the past as well as today, the *Latinos*. The Croatians and Serbs were in very good relations: they mutually addressed each other with kin terms (sister, brother), helped and attended Saint Patron's days (the Croatians also celebrated Saint Patron's day). The Catholic church in Letnica, on August 15th each year, on the day of the Assumption of Mary, was an example showing an overcome of ethnic and religious boundaries and mixed pilgrims in Kosovo (Duijzings 2000). Gravitation of the Serbs toward the church in Letnica was emphasized also in times other than this holiday. Religious boundaries were crossed-over by accepting the temple with a different religious token, but the group boundaries of *we/they* remained. The opposition *we/they* reflected in everyday life, in relationships characterized by trust and respect but also a distance. Mixed marriages were almost non-existent since the parents from both side were against it due to the religious difference (marriages between Albanians Catholic and Croatians Catholic were allowed). The discourse of the Serbian community in the enclave is colored with nostalgia and issues regarding religious identity. Story about Letnica crosses over strongly fixed and controlled ethnic and religious boundaries (Zlatanović 2008).

In discourse of the members included in the research, the Albanians show a wide range of sentiments: from extremely negative determinations to the strong feeling of vulnerability in 2003 in Vitina, to nostalgia in 2006 in the Gnjilane surroundings. Discourse on Albanians differs depending on the fact whether they have lived in ethnic mixed villages or not, in urban or rural areas, age etc. The experience of living in mixed environment allows a better understanding of the Albanian community, their way of life and spoken language. Discourse on Albanians is multilayered and complex, differing from informant to informant, while the account of one and the same informant often varies having many layers in determinations. On the other hand, the discursive construction depends on Albanian group membership too- whether one belongs to the Catholics in Vitina and surroundings or to Muslims, to old neighbors and friends to "the natives", or newcomers, who have "come down from the mountains or arrived from who knows where" and bought off, stole and destroyed Serbian homes and property. In Serbia, Albanians are marked as the most distant *others*. In Kosovo Pomoravlje area the discourse of the Serbian community is changeable and ambivalent, but Albanians surely represent significant *others*, and depending on a particular case, they are perceived as closer or distant *others*.

The Roma represent distant *others*. And while informants talk about the *Serbian Gypsies* using possessive pronoun "our", Roma are mentioned with a distance, only to answer to my question.

The Serbian community of southeast Kosovo is going through dramatic changes seen in identity discourses presented briefly here without transcribed accounts of my informants. In the post-war context, in radically changeable ethnic and

social milieu, within the Serbian community several processes of articulation and re-articulation of identity are being open. A discourse about the *other/others* represents a part of the wider discourse-identity complex.

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