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INTER-ETHNIC MARRIAGES AMONG ANTAGONISTIC NATIONS: POSITIVE MEDIA DISCOURSE ABOUT ALBANIAN WOMEN AND SERBIAN MEN

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Abstract: This is a study about inter-ethnic marriages between the members of two antagonistic nations in the Western Balkans: Serbian and Albanian. The first part of the paper describes the geographical and socio-cultural framework of the research, along with presenting key historical factors that have contributed to the long-lasting antagonism between the above-mentioned ethnic groups. The second part of the paper is an analysis of media coverage of inter-ethnic marriages between Serbian men and Albanian women. By depicting the socio-cultural context in which these "ordinary" people have founded their marriages, some gender-related issues were opened and the binding of various historical, cultural, and demographic factors that are reflected in the lives of the "invisible" Albanian women in Serbia was shown. Their "invisibility" and marginalization have been deepened by the absence of their administrative status in Serbia, the absence of the right to healthcare, social protection, and the complete economic dependence on a man/husband. As a result of this, the marginalization, invisibility, and submission of these women to the will of their husbands is another example of the reproduction of strong patriarchy in the Western Balkans in the 21st century.

Keywords: inter-ethnic marriages; media discourse; Southwestern Serbia; Northern Albania

Introduction

There are several articles related to the connections, comparisons, or confrontations between Serbia and Albania (Bakić, 2014; Çeku, 2019), while there are many politically colored papers concerning different aspects of Kosovo's independency and ongoing tensions between the Serbs and the Albanians. The situation is even more challenging when researches try to refocus attention on everyday life of Serbian and Albanian people (Milovanović, 2016, 2018). What do ordinary people do? How do they interact? Very little is known about these things, primarily in Serbian and Albanian scientific papers (Aritonović, 2009, 2015; Istrefi & Qosaj-Mustafa, 2009; Krasniqi, 2007, 2009; Luci 2002). As many other topics refer to this framework, the concept of *ordinary* and *everyday* has been

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analyzed from different and sometimes strongly opposite perspectives, often dependent on whether it is spoken “of everyday” or “from everyday” (Milovanović, 2016).

In recent history and media in particular, the Albanians and the Serbs appeared as confronted nations with xenophobic attitudes caused by highly polarized identity politics related to Kosovo’s independence. Various papers and books published in both ethnic groups contributed to this, and they dealt with the same territory and historical events in a completely different way. Thus, competitive histories and inter-ethnic antagonism have been prolonged for decades making trauma as the essence of everyday life of all ethnic, generational and gender groups in the conflict territory. Immediately after Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence in 2008, this issue still continues to proliferate independence discourse in the national and international context. Although Kosovo (without prejudice to positions on status in line with United Nations Security Council 1244/1999) is not officially a part of Albania, the Serbian perception of Albania articulates a radical form of a binary opposition. This is also evident from the social survey about ethnic distance, as Serbian people indicate the highest ethnic distance from Albanians (Çeku, 2019). The social context in Albania is rather similar, as students have negative stereotyped attitudes and the highest ethnic distance toward Serbs (Rapti & Karaj, 2012). Furthermore, official public discourse in Serbia mobilizes national and traditional values that have been referred, for over a decade, to a slogan *Kosovo is Serbia*. Also, the study of Kandido-Jakšić (2008) indicates that after the disintegration of former Yugoslavia, significant ethnic distancing has developed in this region with respect to all nations, but the greatest level of animosity and intolerance has been manifested toward the Albanians and between the Serbs and the Croats.

However, the cultural space of everyday life has changed character in the historical and geographical sense. This actually means that cultural spaces of everyday life constantly permeate, but each of them is special about something. Permeation and uniqueness should be carefully studied and attended. As noted by Tait and Lyall (2007), our awareness about the basics of our own culture correlates with a measure of familiarization and understanding of other cultural spaces, especially those in our neighborhood. In search of deeper understanding of the interaction between the Serbs and the Albanians, it is necessary to move research beyond often-polarized hard politics. Therefore, international and inter-ethnic marriages between Serbian men and Albanian women seem to be a research topic of growing importance for social sciences. Furthermore, it is important to shed light on media discourse, as well.

Theoretical framework and methodology

This paper is a contribution to the interdisciplinary merging of three significant sociological concepts in specific socio-cultural contexts: the phenomenon of inter-ethnic marriages, the media discourse on them, and the role of inter-marriage in Serbian rural society. As Youngblood (2007, p. 1) concluded before “no discipline is an island entire to itself”, it has become evident that interdisciplinarity goes beyond mainstream research positions. This implies a kind of openness and creativity in bridging the defined methodological boundaries. A topic that needs to be seen from multiple perspectives requires the linking of disciplines to lay the groundwork for further research. This interdisciplinary study aims to identify and take into consideration three main problems: how gender can play a role in defining the new situation of reviving abandoned rural areas through international marriages between Albanian women and Serbian men; to what extent intercultural relations impact on male

and female representations; in which way *reviving* can affect media images on the possible development of cultural collaboration between the two confronted nations?

These questions should become the most important in the research domain of inter-ethnic marriages in rural Serbia. The majority of the recent literature tends to treat the inter-ethnic issues from a single perspective (Clark, 2014). This research strives to overlay the regarded issue with multiple layers and approaches the problem in an interdisciplinary way. It means that interdisciplinary research occurs “where the contributions of the various disciplines are integrated to provide holistic or systemic outcomes” (Tait & Lyall, 2007, p. 1). Holistic outcomes are needed here as a ground for further research related to the issue of inter-ethnic marriage and ethnic conflicts. Because of that, the research combined several methods that can be helpful in this respect. The theoretical and methodical framework is based on compatible usage of discourse analyses, contemporary feminist theory, and gender studies, especially on the connection between gender and rural geography. As Gee (2010, p. 16) noticed, “thanks to the fact that we humans engage, inside and outside interactions, in recognition work, discourses exist in the world”. Discourse analysis is a useful tool for a deeper understanding of many aspects of social reality. Starting with the point that media represent rather than reflect reality, discourse analysis has been applied to five media texts related to Albanian women in Southwestern Serbia.

Feminist theory defined the difference between gender as a biological category and gender as a social construct among many other theoretical and practical achievements. It is complex, historically, and culturally changeable. Therefore, feminist studies rejected *biological determinism* and introduced the term of gender as a social, culture-historical organization of gender differences (Wharton, 2011). It is considered that gender ideologies are joint constructions of meaning and reality in society, conceptualized as individuals' levels of support for a division of paid work and family responsibilities that is based on the belief in gender-separated spheres (Davis & Greenstein, 2009). During the last two decades, the analytical category of gender has been used as a basis of theoretical consideration in almost all the areas of social life, while gender has become one of the key research areas in geography as well.

Rural geography as a part of human and social geography investigated geographic and other factors which affect existence, development and the main function of rural areas, with population placed in the research focus (demographic structure, economy, migrations, rural exodus and social and psychological adaptation, rural lifestyle, socio-cultural aspects, etc.). It is considered that with the demise of regional geography, rural areas were relatively neglected in geography until the 1970s (Johnston, Pratt, Watts, & Whatmore, 2000), while especially interesting part of rural studies and investigation of rural geography were gender issues. During the 1970s and 1980s, gender studies were mostly aimed at the patterns of gender inequality. Nowadays, the research area was spread on identity, representation, space, and power. According to that, interest in gender research within rural geography through academic discourse increased very fast. Terms such as *rurality* and *gender* are increasingly observed from new perspectives.

Scholars of gender are well-positioned to produce new geographies by highlighting how negotiations (even struggles) over gender, power, and space are implicated in changing notions of the countryside, new configurations of community and work, and the policy of environment and sexuality in rural settings (Little & Panelli, 2003). The discourse on *reviving* abandoned villages in Southeastern Serbia is tightly connected with the policy of rural origin and the production of gender ideology. There is little research related to key topics of gender and rural geography developed in Serbia and other countries of Southeastern Europe such as the influential study by Jo

Little, *Gender and Rural Geography* (Little, 2001). The specific purpose of this paper is to detect problems related to rural areas of Southwestern Serbia and focus on the everyday life of Albanian women who got married and established their families there. To round up the research efforts that relate to the living of ordinary people in rural areas of Serbia, it is required to put an accent on the great exploratory potential of gender and rural geography. The paper presents a pioneer attempt to open a field of linking gender, inter-ethnic marriages, and rural geography in Serbia and Southeastern Europe. Also, an important aspect is the process of reviving almost diminished villages through inter-ethnic marriages and its representations in media discourse. It is considered particularly important due to contested past, and continuous conflicts present in politics of Albania and Serbia. As such, it triggers gender issues and topics such as nationality, religion, and identity.

A country in continuous search for rural identity

Serbia is a sovereign state situated in the crossroad of Central and Southeastern Europe, with a total population of 7,186,862 people (Kosovo and Metohija excluded) (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2011). Serbia is a predominantly rural country, as according to Drobnjaković (2019) about 96.2% of Serbia's territory may be considered rural, even though Serbian official statistics recognize *urban* and *other settlements*. In a very short and explicit way, OECD defines rural areas as communities with a population density below 150 inhabitants per square kilometer (Dijkstra & Poelman, 2014). According to this criterion, about 93% of the territory of the Republic of Serbia may be classified as rural on a settlement level (Drobnjaković, 2019).

Even though there is still no unique definition of *rural areas*, European Charter for Rural Areas (Seiler & Anttila, 1996) in details defined rural area as a stretch of inland or coastal countryside, including small towns and villages and agricultural and non-agricultural parts of a rural area, completely different from the urban area (Woods, 2009). For the purposes of the study, a dichotomy between urban and rural settlements based on the official national statistics marking *other settlements* as *rural settlements* as recommended by Mitrović (2015) was accepted. In Serbia, from 1953 to 2011, the share of the urban population grew from 22.5% to 59.4%, therefore about 40.6% of the total population of Serbia (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2011) may be considered rural (Mitrović, 2015). The term *rural* is often connected with poverty, while agriculture is not a kind of economy defined by plans. In Serbia traditional, old-fashioned, mono-functional agriculture is still dominant.

There are several causes of the lack of rural development and poverty increase in the rural parts of Serbia. Firstly, during the 1990s, Serbia survived severe conflicts, wars, and changes that affected its economy and society. As a consequence of different disturbances in the socio-economic infrastructure of the country, the value of gross domestic product had dramatically fallen. The transition period has lasted more than it was expected while reforms in the domain of market economy and integration with the region and the European Union are rather slow in progress. Secondly, depopulation is the basic demographic feature of numerous rural settlements in Serbia, as these areas of Serbia received the characteristics of rural exodus even in the sixties of the 20th century, starting from the eastern and southeastern parts toward other parts of the country (Todorović & Drobnjaković, 2010). This trend can be followed backward from the end of World War II when the processes of urbanization, industrialization, deagrarianization, and deruralization were accelerated. Due to mass media communication and education, villages started to accept many elements of urban culture, and there was a reversible process of decreasing the share of rural

population starting from the year 1953, with the young leaving villages (Penev, 1999). However, the most intensive process of deruralization and depopulation appeared at the end of 20th and beginning of the 21st century, which is described as *village disappearance*, in the process of *spontaneous abandonment* (Milošević, Milivojević, & Čalić, 2010). Based on the last Population Census (2011), 1034 villages in Serbia have less than 100 citizens with predominantly elderly inhabitants, with clear regional disparities—Belgrade (0.6%), Vojvodina (2.6%), Šumadija and Western Serbia (15.5%), Southern and Eastern Serbia (35.1%) (Mitrović, 2015).

All the factors that enable revitalization of the population are collected around the issues of family, as a primary human community and a basic reproductive social institution whose mandatory role is to enable childbirth (Mitrović, 2015). Therefore, it is important to determine why and when the trend of reviving almost diminished villages in Southwestern Serbia started to develop through international marriages (Serbs getting married to Albanian women). Also, it is important to investigate the role of women in the new environment from the perspective of relations between rural geography and gender theory. Therefore, the special attention will be directed to the facts that there were serious conflicts between the Serbs and the Albanians in recent history and the role of Albanian women in the revitalization of the abandoned villages in Southwestern Serbia.

A similar trend of reviving the villages was present in central Serbia at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century when marriages between men from Serbia and women from Montenegro were concluded. Even though these marriages were concluded between people of the same ethnicity, language and religious confession, coming to villages based on recommendations by people who usually got rewarded, this trend did not sustain for too long. Also, recently, quite popular was the trend of Russian and Belorussian women to become brides in Serbia, and there are also few such agencies established for matchmaking purposes. However, these trends are not interesting as a trend between Serbian men and Albanian women (due to ethnic, religious, and cultural differences), even though the same projection is in the level of rurality and patriarchal values of the area from which brides came.

Looking at the new rural environment, we can see how diminished Serbian villages have become *liminal space* for Albanian brides. Most Albanian women come to Southwestern Serbia from Northern Albania and make marriages with the Serbs (despite the domination of Bosnian and Muslim ethnic majorities in the same region). It further develops questions related to gender, rural geography, identity, religion, socialization of a child from the marriage of spouses of different ethnicities and confessions, etc. It should be highlighted that ethnic distance of Serbs toward Albanians is the largest in the region and is perceived as much bigger than toward any other ethnic group according to NGO's research *Country Programming Document for Albania 2014–2017* (UNESCO Office Venice and Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe, 2015). However, confessional orientation is regarded closer, as it is estimated that 70% of Albanian women (Serbian brides) are Catholic Christian. The core values of rurality articulate social frames that put empathy, emotions, and connectivity in, while, the meaning of liminal space always arises stories of the transition process. In this case, liminality is a mental concept rather than a physical place, indicating that rurality has become liminality and vice versa. We could metaphorically say that the process of liminality is coming to an end as mediated rural *happy end*.

Albanian population in Southwestern Serbia: rurality, belonging, and identity

Historically, Albanian population share in Serbia was growing since World War II, from 8.15% (1948) up to 13.99% (1981) (Kosovo and Metohija included), while it was significantly reduced to 1% (1991) and 0.82% (2002) as a result of Albanian boycotts (Djurić, Tanasković, Vukmirović, & Ladjević, 2014). The Albanian population was further reduced to 0.08% in 2011 due to the political expropriation of Kosovo and Metohija, which is also reflected in the strict regional concentration of the Albanian population within Serbian administrative territory. Albanian population was dominantly present in three communities—Preševo, Medveđa, and Bujanovac, continuously boycotting the Census, but the population projection indicates that about 73,500 Albanian people are living in Serbia (73,580 or 1.0% of the total population of Serbia) (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2011). Regional distribution of the Albanian population of Serbia, shows that in Vojvodina region live 0.12% Albanians, in Belgrade region 0.08%, in Southern and Eastern Serbia 89.11%, and in Šumadija and West Serbia region only 0.03% (Djurić et al., 2014). Half of the Albanian population in Serbia is concentrated in Preševo municipality, while 89% of this population can be observed by commuting with the Albanian population in Bujanovac (southeastern parts of Serbia). There are no more than 11% of Albanian people outside these two communities in Serbia (Marinković, 2014).

Southwestern Serbia (southern part of the Region of Šumadija and Western Serbia), known under different names: Raška area, Starovlaška-Raška highland, and Sandžak is a predominantly rural area, representing suborder territory spreading towards the northwest of Bosnia and Herzegovina, southwest of Montenegro, and southeast of Kosovo. Within official statistics in Šumadija and Western Serbia region the total 2,031,697 people live, of which only 0.03% (591) are Albanians (according to nationality) (Djurić et al., 2014). This region represents a multi-ethnic environment, but Albanians are not the dominant ethnic minority group of this region. On the other hand, Bosniaks and Muslims (8%) are highly present ethnic minorities in this region and even the dominant population of a few municipalities (they make an absolute majority in 127 settlements) in Raška and Zlatibor region (in Sjenica, Tutin and Novi Pazar municipality), indicating that Bosnian and Muslim ethnic identities and the Islamic religion are somewhat more dominant here than in other regions within Serbia. Further, this area (Novi Pazar, Tutin, Sjenica, Nova Varoš, Prijepolje, and Priboj) records the youngest population and highest fertility rates in Serbia, especially among Muslim, Albanian and Roma ethnicity, while the negative population growth trend in Serbia is continuing. According to Mitrović (2015), this trend may create an ethnic-religious asymmetry of childbirth rate which is especially projected on the borderline municipalities of Serbia. Also, according to Nikitović (2016), the rural zones (especially those in border and mountain regions) are marked with a deficit of young women, noting that agrarian zones of young men surplus and urban “oases” of young women surplus jointly reinforce the process of demographic aging and poverty in Serbia. Such a negative trend might have opened the need for importing young brides from Albania for elderly Serbian bachelors from rural areas. Among Albanians living in Serbia, 71% are Muslims, 2.6% are Orthodox, and 17% are Catholic Christians (Djurić et al., 2014).

According to Table 1, on the regional level, equal gender distribution of Albanian people is evident in this region. Most of them (56.5%) are in the reproductive age (15–50 years old), 13.4% represent children under 15 years, and 30.1% are the elders (older than 50) (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2011). However, there is a significant difference in the age distribution of genders, as females tend to be much younger than males in all the districts and municipalities. The domination of Albanian women is clear in Moravica District, where Albanian women have the share of 81.3%, which is particularly obvious in Ivanjica and Čačak municipalities. Albanian women of a

relatively young age are dominant also in Bajina Bašta, Sjenica, Mionica, Arilje, Kosjerić, Gornji Milanovac, Aleksandrovac, Brus, Trstenik, Raška, Rekovac (but in rather small numbers). In all these municipalities there is an extremely high rate of the Serbian population, with over 99% declaring Serbian as mother tongue, the single exception is Sjenica where Bosnian is the predominant mother tongue (Djurić et al., 2014). Almost half of the Albanian population of this region lives in Raška District (267), of which 75.7% is settled within Novi Pazar municipality (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2011). This indicates the high possibility of multi-ethnic marriages between Serbian men and Albanian women in the abovementioned municipalities.

Table 1

Geographical distribution of the Albanian population in Šumadija and Western Serbia Region

Region and Districts	Total	Male		Female	
		N	Average age	N	Average age
The Republic of Serbia	73,580				
Šumadija and Western Serbia Region	591	295	43.1	296	33.9
Zlatibor District	78	36	47.4	42	32.3
Kolubara District	12	6	57.7	6	41.3
Mačva District	19	14	58.8	5	46.9
Moravica District	32	6	69.2	26	36.1
Rasina District	52	21	35.3	31	28.5
Kolubara District	46	28	44.4	18	42.4
Pomoravlje District	85	47	39.2	38	30.7
Raška District	267	137	40.9	130	34.2

Note. Adapted from Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2011). *Population Census, 2011: Population according to ethnicity and gender, in municipalities and cities*. [Data file]. Retrieved from http://popis2011.stat.rs/?page_id=2162.

According to Hisa (2015a), inter-ethnic marriages between Serbian men and Albanian women occurred in the transitional period, with a strict geographical concentration in the Sandžak area, especially zones of Javor Mt., borderline villages with Montenegro toward Nova Varoš and Ivanjica. Sandžak area is the region where the phenomenon first started, and it was actually the zone of the greatest concentration of Albanian-Serb couples, even though this phenomenon spread all over Serbia. Hisa (2015a, p. 244) also notes that “most of the Albanian women that marry in Serbia or Kosovo area come from the villages around Lezhe, Shkoder, and Puka, and are mostly Catholics, but also there are a few Muslims as well”. The trend of multi-ethnic marriages in Serbia is growing, and Albanian brides are even more actual than ever, as the immigration of Albanian women for marriage purposes is continuing since the 2000's when the Albanian brides started giving life to the secluded and abandoned rural areas of Serbia (e.g., Sandžak). Also, the popularity of Albanian brides has grown and expanded geographically toward urban areas and to the inner central parts of Serbia, even Serbian diaspora as well. Babović (2017) mentions that men from Rasina District more often marry Albanian women from Tirana and Skoder, noting that in the last 10 years over 200 inter-ethnic marriages have been concluded in this district. However, media discourse indicates that the spatial distribution of Albanian brides is still consistent with rural demographically drained areas.

Albania is placed in the southwestern part of the Balkan Peninsula, representing a mostly mountainous rural country. Almost the same deruralization trend as in Serbia was evident in Albania in previous periods. In terms of extreme urbanization and migration process, the rural population in Albania was also reduced significantly, and therefore 2011 Population Census in Albania shows the domination of urban population (53.5%) while in rural Albania (92.8% of total state area) live about

46.5% of the population (50.7% male and 49.3% female) (Institute of Statistics of the Republic Albania [INSTAT], 2012). The fertility rate is extremely high, and it was twice as high as the European average. Furthermore, in an economic sense, Albania is a very poor country, supported by the fact that in the period between 1990 and 2005, over one million Albanians emigrated and over 400,000 are estimated to have moved within the country, mainly toward urban areas (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2012). The Shkoder region in the northern part of Albania (from which most of the Serbian brides originate) is characterized as a predominantly rural area with 55.6% of region's population (of total 215,347 people) being labeled as rural (INSTAT, 2011, 2013). There is also a slight domination of females living in rural areas of the Shkoder region (55.1% of total female population). Dominant ethnicity is Albanian (91.7%), while the dominant confession is Catholic Christianity (47.2%) followed by Islam (44.8%). It is also interesting to note that in this region there are significantly higher divorce rates among females (1.1%) compared to males (0.5%), as well as a much higher share of widowed women (11.9%) compared to only 2.2% widowed men (INSTAT, 2012, 2013).

Therefore, the occurrence of the inter-ethnic marriages between Albanian women and Serbian men is unlikely to be the consequence of the lack of adequate marriage possibilities within the same country or ethnicity, indicating the phenomenon of mixed-marriages tends to be rather of socio-economic nature. This kind of migration implies that the reason for young Albanian women concluding marriages in Serbia is mostly related to looking for a better life. Also, the disproportion in gender distribution in rural areas of both countries may have induced the phenomenon. Knežević (2017) indicates that dozens of villages in Serbia are dying out, as women in their reproductive age have left rural areas and seek a better life in cities, while young men have stayed to take care of their rural properties, unable to find a proper partner to marry. The opposite trend in Albania, where rural depopulation is caused by men going abroad and young women staying behind, opened the possibility for matchmakers' market (Knežević, 2017) and introduced Serbian-Albanian marriages. According to Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2013, 2015, 2018) in 2017 the total of 503 Albanian brides concluded marriages in Serbia, 448 with Albanians (89.1%, all in Southern Serbia), 36 with Serbs, and 19 with other ethnic groups in Serbia. On the other hand, only 15 marriages were concluded between Albanian men and Serbian women (seven in Vojvodina region, four in Belgrade). Out of 35 marriages of Albanian brides in the region of Šumadija and Western Serbia, 33 marriages were concluded with Serbian grooms (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2018). In previous periods there is consistency in this trend of inter-ethnic marriages between Albanian brides and Serbian grooms in this particular region. Here, in 2012 a total of 43 Albanian brides concluded marriages only with Serbian grooms, while in 2014 out of 71 marriages of Albanian brides 65 marriages were concluded with Serbian grooms (91.5%), two marriages with Albanians, two with Bosniaks and one with a Muslim groom (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2013, 2015).

Ethnic groups vary in their degree of preference for *ethnic endogamy*, but when considering *exogamous marriages*, close cultural traditions outside their own ethnic group preferred partners from the same cultural tradition (Western, Balkan and Middle Eastern cultural tradition) have a more significant role than ethnicity in terms of choosing partners (Botev, 1994). Moreover, a multi-ethnic environment is considered better for acceptance of different cultural patterns and practicing inter-ethnic marriages. The same author Albanians as particularly closed ethnic group characterized by strong endogamy. Also, Albanians are showing the strongest objection in marrying the Serbs, while endogamy is even more pronounced among the Albanians from Kosovo. On the other hand, the

Serbs are labeled as the least endogamous group in the Balkans, and show less opponence in marrying Albanian brides. According to Botev (1994), existing ethnic and cultural barriers diminish in areas where other ethnic groups are in majority, as in areas where large Islamic populations live cultural traditions based on Christianity tend to stick together, which might be the case in the particular area of Sandžak (Serbia).

From the diminished villages to liminal space for new brides from Albania

Inter-ethnic marriages between male Serbs and Albanian women are considered a specific social, cultural, and demographic phenomenon, having in mind traditional antagonism between nations and large communication problems between spouses. Moreover, in the media discourse, we may see that young Albanian women often marry Serbs who are mostly middle-aged and not particularly wealthy (Babović, 2017; Knežević, 2017). Considering all the facts, especially those related to the permanent confrontation of the two nations, the explanation of this phenomenon is not easy. One of the reasons may be the fact that Albania is considered a poor country in which young Albanian women, especially those from passive rural areas, do not see their future. Even though, the area where they move for marriage and family is not economically developed, it is obviously considered better in a certain way. A migration decision-making process is regarded as a family project, indicating that among Albanians such migration pattern is pioneered by men and followed by family reunion (Bonifazi & Sabatino, 2003; King & Vullnetari, 2012). However, female migration can be seen as the potential to change position, status, and power within or outside the household (King & Mai, 2008). If women move from rural to urban areas there is an increased potential for their empowerment, resulting in women experiencing an increase in their autonomy and agency (Ghosh, 2009). The benefits of such migration can, however, vary for migrant women depending on their motivations, expectations, educational level, background characteristics, social status, and the standpoints of their husbands in the household (Çaro, Bailey, & van Wissen, 2012).

However, that is not the only reason. Young men leave for EU and girls and young women mostly stay because their patriarchal culture demands it in a certain way. Reflecting on the patriarchal nature of the Albanian society, emigration has been a male-dominated process, while independent female migration (particularly of unmarried women) has been limited. Furthermore, Albania falls within the wider realm of Balkan patriarchy (King & Vullnetari, 2012) and possibly represents, especially in northern mountainous areas, its most extreme form. Such traditional attitudes exist elsewhere in the Balkans, but in Albania, particularly in the northern parts of the country, notions of gender and gender relations are formed by cultural beliefs and customary law, known as the Kanun. Although a forced marriage is generally disapproved by society, it is a “well-known phenomenon in the country, especially in rural and remote areas” and girls and women in these areas are “very often forced into marriages because of patriarchal mentality and poverty” (King & Vullnetari, 2012, p. 212). In the region of Southeastern Europe, trafficking of young women for marriage purposes is usually mentioned in the context of the custom of “selling the bride” (Long, 2005).

It is, however, clear that traditional Albanian society was based on two fundamental tenets: the central function of the family unit and strong patriarchal principles, involving both patrilinearity (family membership follows the male line) and patrilocality (wives move into the household of the husband's father). Positions and social roles within the family and wider society are ascribed

according to gender, generation, and age, but in general, women are subordinated within the context of a male-dominated family (King & Vullnetari, 2012).

By accepting the idea to marry a man of different confession and nationality, women symbolically make gender equality action—a step away from hard patriarchal Albanian patterns in which a man is in charge, toward still existing, but the more relaxed patriarchal regime in Serbia. Everything is developed to project the *happier* future of Albanian women in Serbia, while media discourse offers *fairytale* narratives on this phenomenon. According to the manager of Agency and humanitarian organization *Stara Raška* which mediates in making these marriages, 350 marriages were concluded so far, providing 500 of newborn children from these marriages (Hisa, 2015b).

Matchmaking organizations operate on both sides and provide services for a certain amount of money. The rates for the matchmaking process vary significantly and may be provided via specialized organizations and individual matchmakers (freelance). The main limitation in the direct contact between bachelors and brides represent the language barrier, therefore, matchmakers offer the service of translation and negotiations. From media discourse, we may conclude how the agency in matchmaking process between Albanian and Serbian couples occurs: After contracting with the matchmaker for a certain amount of money a proper bride (based on specific wishes of bachelor) is to be found. The initial contracting is made by a matchmaker as a representative of the bachelor and a meeting arranged with the bride's family. The decision on the marriage depends on the sole will of the parents, while the economic status of the bachelor is very important (investigated by the bride's family members) and proper gifts need to be given to the bride's family and the bride herself (often gold, symbolically representing the selling of the bride). After the introduction and acceptance, marriage is organized in Albania and the bride is sent to the bachelor's home, indicating breaking all connections with prime family and home, as she becomes the "property of the spouse", as there are rather few cases of returning brides.

Rural happy end in media discourse

Several media articles were published on international marriages between Serbian men and Albanian women in Serbia (Apostolovski, 2009; Babović, 2017; "IN4S istražuje: Zašto se", 2015; Mema & Matić, 2009; Nikoletić, 2012). This topic was also interesting for foreign media. Therefore, this article analyzes two texts published in English in online issues of English magazine *Telegraph* and American magazine *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. Texts which are published in the Serbian language and selected for the analysis are from an online issue of *The Politika* daily newspaper, magazine *National Geographic* in Serbian, and *Deutsche Welle* in Serbian. In a reportage form, this topic appears occasionally in media. The first text was published in 2009, and the last one in 2017. The first text from *The Politika* with headline *Two Albanian women for Serbian brothers* in an interesting and detailed way explains about the first Serb who married an Albanian woman in Pešter area through mediates and his brother who married in a similar way. The text describes the way of mediating contacts between Albanian women and the Serbs, and difficulties which arise after that since the state does not make any progress in visa liberalization and benefits for obtaining Serbian citizenship. Hence, the father-in-law of one Albanian woman claimed that it is not correct if his daughter-in-law cannot obtain money of parental allowance because she cannot obtain a Serbian passport. According to that, the journalist made the following conclusion where he said that the government does not apply correct measures (Apostolovski, 2009). Hence, the socio-political context is analyzed, in which "irrelevant" topics are much more discussed. In the case of

international marriages, the author does not see improvement, progress, nor even concern of the government to make any kind of change although everything is possible for celebrities. The response to a question how these marriages are concluded and maintained despite all the difficulties are seen in the text by Apostolovski (2009) "While government and social elite theoretically speak on reducing white plague, brothers from Buđevo and hundreds of bachelors, their followers travel to Skadar to find their happiness". Some of the brides have even been "smuggled" to Serbia without proper documents (such as a passport), opening the questions of the actual legal status of these women, as well as indications of possible legal abuse of women using traditional marriage custom of "selling the bride" and possibilities of sex-trafficking, as economic hardship in both countries rationalized the growth of the familial industry of trafficking (Long, 2005).

The second text was published in 2011 in an issue of *National Geographic* magazine for Serbia. It received a reward in November *Best Edit* in the competition with more than 30 journals. The headline of this text is *Marriage lottery: Serb and Albanian woman*. It implies different views of the public on this subject, as the wider public with a small amount of information is divided in the case of Serbian-Albanian marriages if we consider online reactions to journal headlines. While some people wish all the best to new couples believing that love can overcome all obstacles, other people see it as a "secret plan" of the Albanians to put much younger women to Serbs which will live longer and continue with Albanian occupation of Serbian territories (Nikoletić, 2012). However, the same author tried to balance these two confronted opinions by not accepting the idea that those are great movie love stories not conspiracy theories. Messages from the text tended to be rational and clear regarding everyday life in the rural and abandoned environment. Numerous agreed and concluded marriages between members of the confronted nations and confessions beside large age difference between spouses (Serbian men and Albanian women) are very successful because they are developed due to a need and released from idealization.

Albanian women have no one to marry, they are raised in patriarchal style, allowance for their marriage is firstly given by male family members and they got married because they do not want to be alone. Men from Serbia cannot find women in Serbia since they are much out of patriarchal patterns, they move to cities, do not want to live in villages and do village work. For the same reason, men do not want to stay alone and not to have families. They marry Albanian women who do not mind to do village work and the fact that they (men) are much older. Nikoletić (2012) calls it a *primary instinct for survival* which is released from religion, politics, and idealization.

The text in the English language on international marriages between the two confronted nations was published in 2009 by English journal *The Telegraph* in the part of ex-pat news, under the title *Marry me? Language no barrier to Serb-Albanian match*. This narrative is already idealized since the love theme is placed on its beginning: "I love you" scribbled on their hands in a language they do not understand, Vidan and Djana made their marriage vows (Mema & Matić, 2009). Only after that, the text contained an explanation that there are tensions and animosities between the Serbs and the Albanians because of Kosovo's issues but that Vidan and Djana have overcome all barriers to be happy. Besides, there is an explanation that there was no bride in Vidan's village for the last 25 years. Also, one attorney as the representative of the Serbian minority in Albania was interviewed, claiming that there are about 8000 demands by Serbs to marry Albanian women. Vidan highlighted that nothing is worse than loneliness and Djana said that she was "well received and with respect" by the inhabitants of Ruda Bukva and Vidan's family (Mema & Matić, 2009). In that way, the *Telegraph* represented one marriage between a Serbian man and an Albanian woman by highlighting life topics such as love, happiness, family, and victory over loneliness and language

differences, while there is no mention of the work of these women in villages and the issues of daily life they have.

However, in a short documentary episode of Trag TV show, we see one of the Albanian brides who talks about her daily routine: she prepares food for the family members, takes care of children, prepares family festivities (so-called *Slava*, Serbian family Patron Saint annual celebration), and helps older people from the family (Jasnić, 2011). Also, a report of B92 (2013) gives an important information on these marriages, their everyday life and problems that these women face in Serbia.

The latest text in 2017 was published by Deutsche Welle under the sentimental title *Albanian women who bring happiness to the Serbs*. The narrative in this line is more covered by details from everyday life and claims by Albanian woman herself, considering the position of the women in Albania and stating that male-female relationships in Serbia are more relaxed. She also outlined that there a woman can get a job, drive a car, and be more independent, which is still unusual in Albania (Djukić-Pejić, 2017). Although it can be considered as expected, it is still unusual since Albanian women come from rural patriarchal and poor environments and this can be considered as certain progress in gender equality. Yet, there is still a lot to learn about the life of Albanian women in Southwestern Serbia. Journalists do not go deeper into presenting and analyzing this topic. They remain on the overall and abstract level which is not enough to convince the audience in which way these women are truly happy. This question was opened by anthropologist Amanda Hisa, who conducted field research and talked to these women. From the researcher's perspective, it was very important to be the same ethnic group member to have an access to these women as interviewees, as they *a priori* accept talking to a woman—same national group member, while researchers from other national groups (for example Serbian) cannot count on an easy access to these women. Therefore, nationality, language, and gender of researcher matter in this kind of research and this particular socio-political context.

Hisa's results (2015b) are very important, being the first detailed insight into the everyday life of Albanian women in villages in Sandžak area, particularly Raška, Nova Varoš, and Ivanjica municipality. Also, it is very important for Serbian researchers to find out what Albanian media write on this phenomenon, which cannot be understood since it is interpreted in the Albanian language. As it was mentioned earlier, there is a part of the Serbian public with the opinion that all of these actions have an agenda behind of the state of Albania to spread its territory. The same conclusion comes from Albanian media reports suggesting that Serbian authorities had a secret design of ensuring continuity of survival for the Serbian nation by exploiting "Albanian wombs" (Hisa, 2015b). Despite these opinions, the dominant media impression on this phenomenon is framed by a *happy end* which in many cases really exists. Justification of such a conclusion lies in a fact that daily life victory is inevitable: as it is seen in the everyday life's triumph over the seemingly untouchable barriers of political ideology (Hisa, 2015b). The connection between gender and rural geography is only a bit opened in the domain of change of level of patriarchal life which exists in Albania and also in Serbia. Furthermore, patriarchal patterns are a complex phenomenon that involves an active role of the social group that forms the cultural space and determines the character of the social order.

The president of *Stara Raška* agency and humanitarian organization indicated that from 2000 to 2013 over 350 multi-ethnic marriages were concluded between Serbian men and Albanian women (Hisa, 2015b). However, the continuing poverty seems to be the main problem of these families, which often tend to have multiple children. Furthermore, there are legal problems that Albanian women are facing, especially considering Serbian citizenship, without which they are unable to get

employment, social aid, social and medical insurance. Therefore, many of these women are still absolutely dependent on their husbands. Although they have married Serbian citizens and gave birth to children in Serbia, these women fail to receive Serbian citizenship for many years and thus fail to acquire the right to healthcare and social protection. The reason for this is the general policy and complicated administrative system. At the level of everyday life, this means that these women are twice as marginalized: they have immigrated to another (ideologically speaking hostile) state, they do not know the language of the people of the country to which they came, they are “invisible” in terms of healthcare and social protection, and they are economically completely dependent on the husband and his family. Their invisibility in the wider social circles is multiple: they live in the rural areas of Southwestern Serbia, where the traditionally patriarchal social pattern is more dominant than in other parts of Serbia. The population they are surrounded by, in terms of demographics, is significantly older than them. Their children are labeled by the local community as children coming from a *marriage project*. Bearing in mind that these children were born from a marriage in which the parents belong to two antagonistic ethnic groups, the issue of ethnic identification may pose a challenge to the personal life of such children throughout their life. In a word, these are young women who have left their families of origin and who came to “the unknown”, where they have founded their families. The remainder of their lives depends exclusively on the good will of their husbands. Hence, the media headlines about a *happy end* represent only the tip of the iceberg that is the story of inter-ethnic marriages between the Albanian women from the Northern Albania and Serbian men from Southwestern Serbia.

Conclusion

This article had an aim to draw academic community attention to research on gender, rural geography, and media discourse on an example of one increasingly important social phenomenon. Media discourse cannot be isolated from society, cultural space, and historical time in which it develops. According to this, media discourse does not exist as any other object and that judgments of its appreciation are historically conditioned and closely related to social ideology. Although the memory of society is reflected in media memory, the conclusion is that a newly developed situation of reviving abandoned rural areas by inter-ethnic marriages is not present enough in contemporary media discourse. Journalists’ interest remains on the level of the symbolism of possible development of cultural collaboration of the two confronted nations through such marriages. Furthermore, narratives are very idealized and romanticized. Despite the relevance of numerous crucial problems related to liminal space and the beginning of new life for new brides, media discourse articulates visibility in the area of fairy-tale happy end. Therefore, within a socio-political and cultural context, dominant discursive meaning in media serves as a replacement for the disturbed diplomatic relationships between two countries. There is an initiative for the improvement of the cultural bonding of two nations through international marriages. However, the media have supported positive framing without delving into the reach of critical journalism. It means the media reproduce the *status quo* of the social subjects’ position. In this way, an affirmation of dominance-subordinate relations has been evident as a starting point of slow journalism and news with a depth.

Meanings are not fixed, and they are changeable. It is possible that in one of the following historical moments we might see the formation of issues related to nationalism, development of gender inequality or sex trafficking appear and emerge. So far, the key frame of reporting on this

topic has remained unchanged on overcoming all the obstacles and a movie-like *happy end*. It is important to provide wider and deeper research which would firstly include participant observation, in-depth interviews, a biographic method in combination with desk researches and media content analysis, and, finally, public opinion research. Only intensive research and analysis can reveal the latent characteristics of the inter-ethnic marriages phenomenon in that part of the Balkans/Europe. However, it is a big project that requires the entire research team, with strong social capital on the ground, in terms of local people who could provide at least initial interviewees. It is a highly sensitive socio-political topic with manifestation in ordinary people's life. By insight into the everyday life of these people (both Serbian men and Albanian women), in some future research authors will discover latent social functions of this socio-political phenomenon.

The contribution of this research lies in the intention of the authors to familiarize the international expert public with the geographical, socio-cultural framework of the research, the phenomenon of inter-ethnic marriages between the members of the two traditionally antagonistic ethnic groups in the Balkans, as well as with the up-to-date media presentation of such marriages.

Limitations and future prospects

This is a topic that requires intensive field research, with the use of in-depth interviews and other compatible research techniques, to provide international public with more complete information about the daily life of Albanian women (and indirectly their families) in Serbia. Also, similar studies may be conducted among other possibly antagonistic nations and different countries in which these women have decided to spend the rest of their lives. Specific preparatory measures are essential, because in a traditionally-patriarchal rural socio-cultural framework, the arrival of a foreigner/researcher (where ethnicity and gender have a significant role) often causes a distrust in regards to the true goals of the research which may prevent or interrupt the research process.

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