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Кнез Михаилова 36/IV, Београд, тел. 011-2636-804
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www.etno-institut.rs

Рецензенти:
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Софија Милорадовић
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Превод на енглески:
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Gordana Blagojević

Ethnographic Institute of the SASA, Belgrade
gblagojevic@hotmail.com

Recent Turkish Migrants in Serbia and the Role of the Serbian-Turkish Friendship Association*

The theme of this work is the population of recent Turkish migrants who live on the territory of Serbia. I wanted to establish which factors from a wider social context have an effect on the selection of signs by which ethnic groups are differentiated. Parallel to this I wanted to establish if there are any factors which could have an effect on ethnic closeness, and on what level.

Key words:

Turkish migrants, Serbia, ethnic identity, *Balkan mentality*, Serbian-Turkish Friendship Association

The theme of this work is the population of recent Turkish migrants who live on the territory of Serbia. Therefore, here I will not write about the descendants of the Turks who moved to Serbia in earlier centuries. Bearing in mind the turbulent relations between Serbs and Turks in the past, I've set a goal for myself to enquire into the reasons why Turks nowadays choose (or don't choose) to live in Serbia. The structure of migrants and problems they are dealing with in everyday life are observed in the work.

At the beginning of this work I need to emphasize that so far there haven't been any works on the theme of contemporary Turkish migrants in Serbia and the Serbian-Turkish Friendship Association "Inat". The aim of this work is to fill in the existing gap in our knowledge. This work was completed after my own empirical research and the using of theoretical literature from the field of ethnology and anthropology. In keeping with the theory of Frederic Barth I contemplate ethnos as a

* This paper is a part of the project 147023: *Ethnicity: contemporary processes in Serbia, neighboring countries, and Diaspora*, financed by the Serbian Ministry of Science and Technological Development.

continuous process of subjective distinction between the *we* and *they* groups, in this case between Turkish migrants and native Serbian population.¹ I followed the idea of M. Prelic who thinks that one of the tasks of a researcher is to grasp how ethnicity functions in practice, understood by the participant as essential.² One of the aims of this research is to reveal cultural signs, i.e. the phenomena to which participants alone give the significance of ethnical identity symbols. The elements of any form of social identity, including ethnic, comprise signs and symbols.³ A symbol, according to Geertz, is any thing, act, event, quality or relation which serves as a transmitter of a certain conception. This conception is the meaning of the symbol.⁴ Ethnic symbols are visible characteristics of a certain group, which are believed to mark the togetherness of the group, and at the same time they separate it from any other ethnic group.⁵ I wanted to establish which factors from a wider social context have an effect on the selection of these signs by which ethnic groups are differentiated. Parallel to this I wanted to establish if there are any factors which could have an effect on ethnic closeness, and on what level.

To collect my oral sources I used the interview method as well as free conversation with the Turkish migrants and the president and active members of the Association.

According to the data I got in the embassy of the Republic of Turkey in Belgrade in April 2007, from consul Mr. Selim Celik, about 150 Turkish citizens live in Serbia. They are mostly businessmen who reside in Serbia alone, while their families are in Turkey. Serbia has a very strict visa regime, which significantly reduces the number of migrants from Turkey. Mr. Hasan Oktem, the Turkish ambassador in Serbia, believes that about 1000 citizens of Turkish descent live in Serbia, while in Kosovo and Metohija there are about 30.000 Turks.⁶

None of the official institutions' representatives could tell me the exact number of Turkish citizens in Kosovo and Metohija. The usual answer is that there are a couple of hundreds. The current situation in Kosovo and Metohija does not al-

¹ F. Barth, *Introduction in Ethnic Groups and Boundaries, The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, ed. F. Barth, Little, Brown and Co., Boston 1969, 9-16.

² М. Прелић, *Проучавање етничког идентитета – нека теоријска питања*, „Традиционално и савремено у култури Срба“, Посебна издања Етнографског института САНУ 49, Београд 2003, 283.

³ Leach E. R., *Culture and communication: the logic by which symbols are connected: an introduction to the use of structuralist analysis in social anthropology*, New York: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1976, 21.

⁴ C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York 1973, 91.

⁵ Ю. В. Бромлей, *Очерки теории этноса*, Москва 1983, 127.

⁶ Mr. Hasan Oktem presented this fact in his interview for a newspaper “Glas javnosti” (November 19th, 2005, 12).

low any field research in that region, and therefore I will mostly deal with the Turks who live on the territory of Serbia proper.

According to the Turkish ambassador in Serbia, Mr. Hasan Oktem, the relations between Serbia and Turkey at political level are excellent. In the field of economy, however, our relations are not satisfactory; we need more investments, and Turkish businessmen are afraid to invest in Serbia.⁷

Although both parties are interested in investing, Turkish participation in investing in Serbia is very small. However, there are some exceptions like “Efes’s” purchase of Pancevo’s brewery and 64,4% of Zajecar brewery shares. Also, Turkish firm “Ozer Motor” from Istanbul started building a factory for the production of electric motors and engine equipment in Boljevac in September 2007.⁸

It is believed that the main reasons why Turks don’t invest in Serbia are the visas Turks have to get in order to enter Serbia, as well as the obtaining of a complicated documentation to start business. However, in the Serbian Economic Council they do not think that visas are the problem. They think that Turks are mainly inclined towards cooperation with the EU and only in the second place with the countries outside the EU. The Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations of the Republic of Serbia also does not think that visas are the problem because the export from Turkey to Serbia has increased in recent years despite the visa regime.⁹

Turkey exports textile, leather, vegetables, fruit, vehicles, metal products, industrial machines, electric equipment. From Serbia they mostly import steel, iron, rubber and plastic products.¹⁰ Therefore, Turks who live on the territory of Serbia proper mostly have their own private firms. There are about 30 business firms, and most of them are in Belgrade.

Besides trade, recent Turkish migrants in Serbia are also involved in other activities. We should mention the Anatolia Foundation for Development and its representative Mr. Burhan Karagulle and Mr. Uygur Sin. The Foundation did some humanitarian work from 2001 until 2007. They organized free English and computer classes. In this way they helped young people who were looking for job, since in order to get a job a certificate that guarantees certain knowledge you need to have a certificate that you have certain knowledge of English language and that you can work on a computer in order to get a job.

In September 2006 a school for foreign languages *Bejza* was opened in Belgrade. The director is Turkish.¹¹ He says that they had no problems either with its opening or with the permission to stay. In 2006 there were 37 learners of Turkish

⁷ “Glas javnosti”, November 19th, 2005, 12.

⁸ “Blic”, July 9th, 2007, 8.

⁹ “Blic”, August 22nd, 2006, 10.

¹⁰ “Glas javnosti”, November 19th, 2005, 12.

¹¹ You can find information about the school on site: www.bejza.edu.yu

language in the school. Teachers (the three of them) are all from Turkey and the classrooms have multimedia equipment. Students of Turkish language also attend the course because of a high level of teaching. At weekends they organize projections of Turkish films. Students have the opportunity to talk about Turkish culture and to learn more about the way of life in Turkey today. In this way the school is raised to the level of a cultural centre. In May 2007 three students took part in The Fifth International Turkish Language Competition in Istanbul. This was the first time that Serbian competitors took part in the competition.

Almost all Turkish examinees say that they feel at home in Belgrade and that they don't feel like they are abroad. However, in everyday life there are certain problems which may look insignificant at first sight, but still have a great influence on their life.

Male migrants prevail in the sex structure of Turkish migrants who have come in the last ten years. Although they are married, their families live in Turkey. They say that it is hard for their women to fit in. Their husbands spend most of their time at work, and they are used to having company in the morning when they drink tea or coffee. They don't speak Serbian and it is hard for them to make friends in the new surroundings. For these reasons many of them decide to go back home. As the result of this, their husbands are forced to finish their jobs and return to Turkey.

Turkish firm owners mostly employ Serbian workers. Sometimes there are misunderstandings due to the cultural differences. One Turkish firm owner complained that Serbs have too many red letters in the calendar when they don't work, *and they would rather die than work on Sundays*. He was surprised when his driver resigned his job, although he had had quite a good salary, when he was offered to work on Sundays and be additionally paid. The driver said that he was also dissatisfied because he didn't have enough time for his social life (due to the working hours from 9 am to 6 pm). The Turkish employer says that Turks first ask how high the salary is, and Serbs first ask about the working hours. Here one can see the difference between the systems of values. We need to look at the etymology of the Serbian word *nedelja* (Sunday) – it is *ne-dela*, i.e., this is the day when you don't work. Besides, some Serbian workers joke about this and say: "What's the use of money if you don't have time to spend it!"

Some Turkish migrants complain that they have a problem with food in Serbia for religious reasons. Namely, pork is a taboo in Islam, and in Serbia every meat is grilled on the same grill. Other than that, they like Serbian cuisine since there are many dishes similar to the Turkish ones.

In Serbia everyone can dress freely the way they like. Namely, women can wear headscarves and pantaloons in public if they want to. Nevertheless, in Serbia, and especially in Belgrade, they don't wear this kind of clothes. Turkish women, however, who wear headscarves, attract attention of people in the street by wearing different outfit and they sometimes feel awkward because everybody is looking at them.

All examinees agree that both Serbs and Turks have a lot of prejudice because they don't know each other well enough. One of the ways to overcome this was the founding of the association of Serbian-Turkish friendship called "Inat".

The Association of Citizens "Inat" was constituted as a non-party, non-governmental and non-profit association of citizens with the purpose of developing mutual friendship within the Serbian-Turkish community, cherishing a well-neighbourly relationship, scientific research of ethnological matter, protection of cultural and historical monuments of both nations in this region, preserving tradition, protection of ecological and human rights in general as well as stimulating cooperation between the two nations, both individually and through social, political and economic institutions in the fields of economic and national affirmation in the world.

The association was founded at the end of 2004 at the initiative of Mr. Dragoslav Milosavljevic, Serbian businessman who worked in France for many years. He is also the president of the association. The general secretary is Ms. Milka Zlatic and the vice-president is Mr. Nedred Duran. According to the words of the president of the association, they need financial means to keep this kind of society working. The procedure for the official opening took a while. And during many attempts to do this they came up with the name for the association (*inat* means spite). Since they didn't get any help from either government, they founded the association "*iz inata*" = out of spite. The word *inat* (spite) is a Turkish word accepted in Serbian language, and spite was their only driving force. They occasionally get some financial help from goodwill donors.

The association has about 500 registered members and a few thousand sympathizers. As for the ethnic structure, the majority of members are Serbian (95%). Among them there are citizens of Turkish descent as well as other nations. Some of them have the so-called Muslim surnames (Tufegdzic, Subasic, Gegic). Also, there are 28 Turkish citizens.

The sex structure is made of 55% male and 45% female members. As for the education, 60% have a university degree. There are doctors, engineers, architects, authors, painters, professors, firm owners. About 30% of the members are 20 to 30 years old. About 25% are born outside Serbia. All members are active and take part in the work with their own ideas and initiatives.

In the statute of the Association it is written that their goal is to collect and study scientific and professional literature, the national heritage related to life and development of the Serbian and Turkish regions; Organize professional gatherings, counsels, seminars, memorials of important events and other activities within this framework individually or with other organizations; Publish books and other editions from their field of interest and in accordance with the law; Coordinate scientific and professional personnel to work on scientific, professional and research projects concerning ethnological and human rights issues; Cooperate with universities,

professional associations and other organizations – domestic and abroad, dealing with Serbian-Turkish history and human rights in general.

They have great plans and interesting ideas, but no money to achieve them. All they have is enthusiasm and voluntary work of their own members. They haven't even been able to pay the phone bill for several months. So, they don't even have enough money for basic needs, not to mention bigger projects.

“Inat” has organized some important exhibitions, lectures and seminars since its foundation which have contributed to the affirmation of Turkish culture and art. On Tuesdays they have a Culture, Art and Friendship Day. Active members meet in the ambience of an oriental salon. They solemnly celebrate Turkish Republic Day (October 29) in the association's offices with the representatives from the Turkish embassy.

The association also organizes Turkish language courses for its members (for Serbian members) and Serbian language courses (for Turks). Turkish language courses have been taking place in the association's offices since January 2005. In the first year lecturers were from the Philological Faculty of the University of Belgrade, from the Department of Oriental Studies. One of them was Ms. Prof. Dr Mirjana Teodosijevic. The Department of Oriental studies was founded in 1926 at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Belgrade. Turkish language has been taught ever since 1925 as the foreign selected language.¹² At first they used textbooks in classes. However, since this method turned out to be very hard and demanding they passed to another method – the Assimil Serbian-Turkish. In the learning process better students help the new ones, and in this way they are able to include new students throughout the year. The offices are available from 8 am to 10 pm. Because many people were interested in these courses they introduced Sunday terms as well. So far 150 students finished the course. At the same time there are Serbian language classes for Turks who live in Serbia.

Business cooperation between Serbia and Turkey also improved thanks to the association. A delegation of the association took part at Istanbul social and economic forum in July 2006 organized by Turkish Economic Council. On this occasion the association was invited to attach to the structures of the Turkish Economic Council. According to the deal the Serbian team for cooperation was to be formed mainly by firms that helped the “Inat” association both in its economic and non-economic work.

There are also branches of the association in Novi Sad, Nis and Novi Pazar. In the Novi Sad branch there are schools of Persian, Turkish and Arabic.

¹² M. Teodosiyeviç, Belgrad Üniversitesi Filoloji Fakültesi Doğu Dilleri Kürsüsü'nün Kuruluşunun Yetmişinci Yıl Dönümü, *Hasan Eren Armağını, Atatürk Kültür, Dil ve Tarih Yüksek Kurumu, Türk Dil Kurumu Yayınları*: 773, Ankara 2000, 296.

Conclusion

Although Serbia and Turkey maintain good political relations, Serbia is a country with few Turkish migrants. I've already mentioned that they are mostly small firm owners and employ Serbian workers. Their families are in Turkey, so they always try to finish their business as soon as possible and then go back to Turkey. Perhaps this is one of the factors why they are so little engaged in the promoting of Turkish culture.

Most examinees believe in the existence of a common *Balkan mentality* even though the research has shown that for the examined population of Turkish migrants there are also some distinguishing symbols of ethnic identity in the Geertz meaning of the word. The transmitters of the conception of ethnic distinction in a given case are primarily language as the main factor of communication, then clothes in the sense that wearing headscarves and pantaloons as a very different style of appearing in public attracts attention and individuals who wear them feel embarrassed, as if they were in a shop window. An ethnic marker is also an attitude towards work and one "taboo" day of the week – one does not work on that day, and its name speaks for itself. Food can also be a factor of ethnic distinction and this originates from the differences between religions – in Islam pork is a taboo.¹³ One might think that Islam is the main reason why a Turkish cultural centre does not exist in Serbia. However, the Islamic Republic of Iran has had a cultural centre in Belgrade since 1991. They have promoted their country by many wonderful programmes.¹⁴ Turkey doesn't have a cultural centre in Serbia. Nevertheless, this research has shown that there are factors which contribute to ethnic closeness. In this case it is the association of Serbian-Turkish friendship which represents the institutionalized level of interethnic communication. The association of Serbian-Turkish friendship was founded on the initiative of the Serbian side. That an association like this should exist looks amazing to many if we have in mind Serbian-Turkish relations in the past. However, if we take into consideration that 95% of the members are Serbian, we can say that Serbs are trying harder to promote Turkish culture than Turks themselves. Besides, this association also plays an important role in establishing economic cooperation with Turkey. This alone speaks for itself about the good will on Serbian side, which makes Turkish migrants feel well accepted in Serbia nowadays, although there are so few of them.

¹³ J. L. Esposito (ed.), *The Oxford History of Islam*, Oxford University Press/New York 2000, 111.

¹⁴ You can read about Iranian cultural centre on site: www.nur.org.yu

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Друштво српско-турског
пријатељства

У раду се посматра популација новијих турских миграната који живе на територији Србије. Разматра се структура миграната, мотиви који су допринели да изаберу баш Србију као земљу у којој живе и проблеми са којима се суочавају у свакодневном животу. Према подацима добијеним у априлу 2007. године у амбасади Републике Турске у Београду, у Србији борави око 150 турских држављана. То су углавном бизнисмени који сами бораве у Србији, док су им породице у Турској. Према слободним проценама турског амбасадора, у Србији живи око 1.000 грађана турског порекла, док на Косову и Метохији живи око 30.000 Турака. Нико од представника званичних институција није знао да саопшти тачан број турских држављана на Косову и Метохији. Тренутно стање на Косову и Метохији не дозвољава обављање теренских истраживања на том подручју, тако да ћу се у овом раду бавити претежно Турцима који живе на територији уже Србије.

Постоји мишљење да главни разлог због којег Турци не инвестирају у Србију јесу визе које они морају да набаве уколико желе да уђу на нашу територију, као и бројна документација која је у Србији неопходна при покретању бизниса. Међутим, у Привредној комори Србије не слажу се са тим да су визе проблем. Сматрају да су Турци превасходно окренути сарадњи са Европском Унијом, а тек онда са земљама ван ЕУ. У Министарству за економске односе са иностранством Републике Србије, такође, сматрају да визе нису проблем, јер последњих година, упркос визном режиму, расте извоз из Турске у Србију.

По питању полне структуре миграната, међу Турцима који су дошли у последњих десетак година преовладавају мушкарци. Ако су и ожењени, породице су им у Турској. Кажу да је женама тешко да се уклопе. Мужеви проводе већи део дана на послу. Оне су саме, а у својој отаџбини су навикле

да у преподневним часовима имају друштво за кафу. Не знају језик, тако да им је тешко да склопе пријатељство у новој средини. Из тог разлога се многе одлучују да се врате у Турску. То за последицу има да су и мужеви приморани да заврше своје послове пре предвиђеног рока и врате се у Турску.

Сви испитаници се слажу да Срби и Турци имају доста предрасуда једни о другима. Оне потичу из њиховог међусобног непознавања. Један од начина превазилажења предрасуда јесте оснивање Друштва српско-турског пријатељства под називом „Инат“. Друштво је основано крајем 2004. године, а представља облик институционализоване интеракције припадника различитих народа. Процедура за званично оснивање трајала је дуго, па је и назив настао током покушаја да се ствар озваничи. Немајући помоћ ниједне владе, основали су удружење *из ината*. Инат је био једини ресурс са којим су могли да крену. Повремену материјално-финансијску подршку имају од донатора.

Турска нема свој културни центар у Србији. Неко би могао помислити да је ислам препрека. Међутим, Исламска Република Иран има свој културни центар у Београду од 1991. године и остварује изузетне програме којима промовише своју земљу. Друштво српско-турског пријатељства „Инат“ основано је на иницијативу српске стране. Постојање таквог друштва многима изгледа зачуђујуће, с обзиром на српско-турске односе у прошлости. Међутим, ако се узме у обзир да 95% чланова Друштва српско-турског пријатељства чине Срби, може се рећи да су Срби ангажованији у ширењу турске културе од самих Турака. У сваком случају, ово Друштво, осим промовисања турске културе, има улогу и у успостављању економске сарадње са Турском. То сведочи о постојању добре воље на српској страни, што доприноси томе да, иако малобројни, турски мигранти осећају да су у савременој Србији добро прихваћени.