

“Turbo folk rules!”: Turbo-Folk, Chalga and the new elites of the post-socialist Balkans

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the role of (neo) folk music industry in the symbolic divisions and identity ‘reshaping’ (national and cultural) of the post-socialist Balkans, with an emphasis on official policies and popular attitudes in two countries, Serbia and Bulgaria. Turbo-folk and chalga, both colloquial but widely adopted terms for ‘modernized folk music’, may be perceived as two names of (more or less) the same phenomenon, which has many counterparts and local varieties throughout the world. The field of popular culture in its ‘post-socialist’ discursive framework is all too often excluded from academic considerations, in spite of its power and efficiency in forging, adopting and disseminating the ideological stereotypes underlying the deep social divisions and ethnic conflicts (not only) in the Balkans. This paper argues that both for its overwhelming presence in the lives of ‘ordinary people’, and for its associations with the national culture and identity, folk music is subject to exceptionally intense processes of manipulation, according to the ideological, cultural and economic (political) interests of the current elites – thus becoming a powerful and malignant vehicle of symbolic divisions on both national and international scales – in spite of (or perhaps due to) its festive and Dionysian veneer, probably nowhere so eagerly exploited as in the Balkans.

KEY WORDS

Post-socialism – elite / popular culture – legitimacy – turbo-folk – chalga – identity (national) – Serbia – Bulgaria – Balkans

1. Introduction

Leaders of SPS¹ and DS², Ivica Dačić and Boris Tadić, respectively, attended the (turbo) folk singer Ana Bekuta’s concert last night. At some point Dačić entered the stage and sang Kad zamirišu jorgovani³...

B92 News, 25 April 2012⁴

¹ The Socialist Party of Serbia, formerly (until his death in 2006) presided by Slobodan Milošević.

² The Democratic Party; three weeks before this news report Boris Tadić had resigned as President of Serbia.

³ Yugoslav hit song released in 1988, as a duet of the Serbian (turbo) folk diva Vesna Zmijanac and Bosnian pop singer Dino Dervišhalidović from the band Merlin.

In my opinion, our social and political reality is 'tabloid' to such an extent that ministers, political figures, behave in manners that were not so long ago reserved for kafana⁵ singers.

Robert Čoban (editor of the tabloid *Svet*)⁶

To put it simply, turbo-folk rules!

Mira Škorić, turbo-folk singer⁷

According to Maria Todorova (1997), there are two views of the Ottoman legacy in the Balkans: one is that Balkan nation-states and their cultures represent a complete break with the Ottoman past; the other argues for a complex symbiosis of Turkish, Islamic, and Byzantine/Balkan traditions that on the level of popular culture and everyday life proved much more persistent. The first position, 'complete break' model won out politically: embraced by generations of political leaders, historians, poets, writers, journalists, and other intellectuals, it largely shaped the conceptions of high culture in the new nation-states. The second position, 'continuity' model seems to have had a life of its own, relegated to the realm of everyday life and cultural habits of the masses. This mini-selection of news reports and TV features supports the basic argument of this paper that only in the post-socialist period these two distinct currents in fact became one. Due to their overwhelming presence in the everyday life and media landscapes of the respective countries, the rise of turbo-folk in Serbia and chalga in Bulgaria may be seen as the most striking symptoms of the new social dynamics of political legitimacy, economic transformation and cultural change.

'Modernized folk music' in the Balkans is a cultural phenomenon which finds itself at the crossroads of numerous academic disciplines (from which I indiscriminately borrow for the purposes of this article). What makes it such an interesting and intriguing object of study, however, is its absence from the maps of official academic 'geography': neither turbo-folk, chalga nor their Balkan counterparts have an academic history, theory, curricula, conservatories, institutes and archives, museum exhibits or public collections. Though associated with a highly influential and most widespread *cultural model* in both countries, they are persistently kept at the fringes of academic concerns.

In the Serbian context, there is no 'official' academic methodology for studying turbo-folk, yet so many scholars write enthusiastically about it. This suggests that turbo-folk claims a specific role and importance in the society, as a symptom of its sharpest social divisions and most visible paradoxes. The hyper-production of discourses

⁴ <http://www.vesti-online.com/Vesti/Srbija/220374/Dacic-pevao-Tadic-mu-aplaudirao>. In February 2012, at the concert of Emir Kusturica's No Smoking Orchestra in Brussels, Ivica Dačić again appeared on stage performing the song *Miljacka*, released in 2007 and originally performed by the Bosnian (turbo) folk star singer Halid Bešlić. In July that year Dačić became the Prime Minister of Serbia.

⁵ A distinct type of local bistro in the Balkans, often associated with live performances of folk music and the concept of social gathering for men which originated in Ottoman Turkey.

⁶ *All that folk! (Sav taj folk)*, episode 5, documentary TV series; author: Radovan Kupres; TV B92, 2004.

⁷ *All that folk!*, episode 1.

and narratives of identity and difference built around the phenomenon of turbo-folk might indicate their 'real' purpose: in this grey zone of the production of knowledge, they serve as ideological shorthand in the processes of social re-structuring and re-stratification, legitimizing (or not) the new political, economic and cultural elites.

So, how come a genre of popular music, despised by the high-cultural gatekeepers since the beginnings of the media industries in the Balkans became a prime indicator of such fundamental shifts in the society? To answer this question, I argue, one must take a big leap back in history, to the times of the beginning of constitution of the Balkan post-Ottoman nation-states (their political, economic and cultural setups) according to the models prescribed by the leading countries of the European West.

2. *Les Voix Bulgares*

– Theoretical and historical background of the *chalga* debate

Bulgarian cultural theorist Alexander Kiossev (1995) argues that 'the self-colonizing cultures' (Balkan post-socialist nation-states included) engendered two equally mistaken doctrines: 1) *Westernization* or *Europeanization* presenting the historical temporality as an athletic competition, a running distance where the civilizational drop-back could be compensated for by 'enlightened' sprinting; 2) *Nativism* – searching, finding and inventing the lost 'authentic substance' of the Nation, and then idealizing it in a bucolic manner. Fashioning of this 'authentic substance' features prominently in all the discussions of authenticity in folk music. Many doubt (Simon Frith among them) whether there is such a thing as an authentic musical form in the first place, claiming that the concept of authenticity more often than not operates as an ideological construct. "The 'industrialization of music' cannot be understood as something that happens *to* music but describes a process in which music itself is made..." (Frith, 2007: 94). Namely, it was technological developments that made our present understanding of musical authenticity possible.

"Having lost its traditional ritual and regulative functions", says Bulgarian ethnologist Radost Ivanova, "already in the beginning of the 20th century, folklore successfully claimed its place in the modern culture, where it assumed new functions and laid foundations for new traditions. In this respect, of major assistance was its mounting on the stage". (Ivanova, 2005: 9)

Bulgaria offers perhaps some of the finest historical examples of the social engineering of folk music and folklore. With its strong ties to the past and its potential for manipulating the national consciousness, folklore had been used to promote Bulgarian nationalism, socialism and ethnic unity (at the same time). The notions of purity and authenticity in the socialist era turned out to mean conformity to a unified (and officially mediated) image of Bulgarian folklore. In addition to incorporating traditional feasts into the official, 'communist' calendar (thus *Gergjovden* became Day of the Shepherds, *Babinden* became Day of Assistance in Child-birth, Cheese Sunday became Day of Parental Respect etc.), the government shaped the form and content of Bulgarian folklore through professional folk music and dance ensembles. The ensembles performed a new, Westernized form of Bulgarian folk music, supervised by the cadre trained in classical music in the Soviet Union. Traditional lyrics of folk songs

were re-worked by state poets into subtle political statements: e.g. in a number of songs in the Pirin Ensemble's repertoire, the word 'Macedonia' had been replaced by 'Bulgaria'. The inevitable result of such professionalization was that amateur village performers began to see themselves – and were seen by others – as inferior. The emphasis on Thracian music contributed to forging the *single* Bulgarian 'national music' at the expense of other regional music idioms (Dobrudja, Moesia, Shopluk, Pirin, Rhodopes...) Moreover, at the waves of Radio Sofia one could hear 'folkloric' themes like this: "Stojan's mother said to him: 'Stojan, my son, Stojan go out my son, lead father's oxen from the stall, plough the black earth and sow the white wheat'. 'Mother, my dear old mother, you speak beautifully but, mother, I'm ashamed to plough with oxen. I'll sign up at our new cooperative farm and become a tractor driver and plow deep furrows'" (Silverman, 1983: 60) Progressive industrialism, the goal of both liberal and Marxist philosophies, should have led to "the withering away of nationalism" (Gellner, 1997: 32) but that simply never happened. In the mid-1960s the regime led by the party's Secretary General Todor Zhivkov turned in a decisively nationalist direction (a development not uncommon in other parts of Eastern Europe, notably Romania and Albania). "Bulgarian politicians", says musicologist Rozmari Statelova, "advise us to keep our selves separate from other nations, nationalities, and ethnicities, to treat them with animosity or at least with suspicion". (Statelova, 1995: 43) In winter 1984/1985 the Bulgarian government instituted a particularly draconian set of regulations aimed at the Muslim minorities in the country: the Turks were deprived of their basic rights and forced to give up Muslim names as Pomaks (Slavic Muslims) had done a decade earlier. In this highly charged political atmosphere, some music forms began to take on a symbolically oppositional character that they previously had lacked – notably rock music sung in Bulgarian and extraordinarily popular *svatbarska muzika* (wedding music), with its megastars like Ivo Papazov (born Ibryam Hapazov) (Bakalov, 2002: 197-223). In addition, *svatbarska muzika* (with its associations with the Ottoman legacies, Roma and Muslim minorities) also challenged the dominant (and demographically false) discourse of the monoethnic nation-state (Buchanan, 1996).⁸

Chalga (Bulgarian pop-folk)⁹ was a product of the free-market opportunities opening after the year 1989. The movement towards the local and indigenous in the 1990s could also be seen as an echo of the world music fad epitomized by the international success of the music project *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares* (with its notable international supporters like the record label 4AD, George Harrison of the Beatles or Kate Bush). In an interview published in 2000, Evgenij Dimitrov, leader of the *pop-folk* group Ku-Ku Bend, described his generation's attitude to folk music: "Official music, official Bulgarian folklore, was buttoned up and was like a museum. ... People had a need to listen to music that was close to their hearts and souls, and so there occurred an influx of music from neighbouring countries: Serbia¹⁰, Greece and Turkey.

⁸ See also the comprehensive study Buchanan 2005.

⁹ For further reading on *chalga* see Ivanova 2004, Ivanova 2001, Dimov 2001, Kraev 1999.

¹⁰ Contribution of Serbian professionals to constitution of the pop-folk (*chalga*) media industry in post-socialist Bulgaria awaits further academic research.

... Even ten years after the democratic changes, the influence from there continues. They still copy many Serbian, Greek and Turkish songs, translated into Bulgarian. Simply they sound close and familiar to Bulgarians, so much so that they have nearly become native folk to them". (Rice, 2002: 32) The most successful concert in Bulgaria of all times was held in 1990 by the Yugoslav (Bosniak-Serbian) (turbo) folk star Lepa Brena in front of app. 100.000 visitors in Sofia. The curiosity of the concert was the way Lepa Brena arrived at the stadium *Vasil Levski* – by landing from the helicopter directly to the stage. This record remains unbroken to this day.

3. Southern Winds of Challenge – Turbo-folk in Serbia

3.1. Historical predecessors and evolution of the genre

In Serbia as well, musicology has traditionally remained a legitimate field of symbolical 'cleansing' of the national culture. Notwithstanding a minority of dissident voices which argued for superiority of Serbian music informed by oriental influence, like Vladimir Đorđević who claimed that this music was „more progressive and colourful, which results from respective crossovers“. (Golemović, 1997: 183) Leading academic composers such as Petar Konjović, Miloje Milojević and Kosta Manojlović advocated purification of folk themes from oriental decorations as something simply 'un-national'. (Dvorniković, 1939: 395) Suppression of oriental influence on the 'pure ethnic song' has had a history on the airwaves of Radio Belgrade since its launch in 1924. (Vidić-Rasmussen, 2002: 20-24; Prica, 1988: 85-87)

The nations dominating the first Yugoslav state from 1918 to World War II (Serbs, Croats, Slovenes) or being fully recognized in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Montenegrins, Macedonians, ethnic Muslims, ethnic Albanian minority) differed in many respects. They certainly had very different music traditions. As described by the Slovenian-Croatian musicologist Svanibor Pettan, in their epic songs held in high esteem Christian and Muslim singers glorified heroes belonging to the mutually opposing sides. "What one ethnic group looked at as the glorious past, the other looked at as a national tragedy. Consequently, patriotic songs of one ethnic group were treated as nationalistic by the other". (Pettan, 1998) In socialist Yugoslavia, a specific kind of post-war urbanization brought rural immigrants to the centres of cities as representatives of new political and social power. Like in Bulgaria, folklore was highly appreciated as part of the national value-orientation: *kolo* and other folk dances were frequently performed in the city streets by both amateur and professional groups. In the 1950s two groups of phenomena had a strong impact on the relationship society – tradition. 1) With the industrialization in full swing, many predominantly young people from the rural parts of the country moved to the cities to work or study: they shared a dominant value, which could be best described as 'urgent desire to get rid of the village'. In other words, this means wiping out all traces of peasant origin and becoming urbanized as soon as possible. The desire was reinforced by the official ideology and agenda of development, which did not, at the time, rely on agriculture. 2) Political centralism favoured a unification of national and regional spe-

cific traits: devaluation of tradition manifested itself in the overwhelming sense of shame of 'traditional primitivism'. Folklore and other expressions of folk life were even labelled as reactionary, banned from cultural programs as incompatible with (or even detrimental to) economic development. The 1960s saw democratization of social life resulting in new attitudes towards the 'tradition' (on national and local levels), aided by the Yugoslav version of market economy, self-management system and decentralization of political and social power. *Folklorismus* ('second existence of folklore') became a particular kind of consumable good in the tourism and entertainment industries. (Rihtman-Augušin, 1978)

The release of Lepa Lukić's single *Od izvora dva putića* (1964) marked a symbolic beginning of the new era of commercial expansion of the 'newly composed folk music' (*novokomponovana narodna muzika* - NNM). Nevertheless, the concept of 'culture' in a socialist society stood for accessibility, humanist principles and, above all, *artistic values*. In other words, the ideology of progress imposed upon the revolutionary peasantry (which 'evolved' into the working class) the need of modern cultural institutions. In 1955 around 40% of the 'working people' in the country were peasants-industrial workers (Milić, 1978: 111), referred to by the Croatian publicist Veselko Tenžera as "centaurs of Yugoslav economy" (1988: 129). The traditional peasantry and this emerging class were expected not only to depart from their old ways and embrace modern(ized) and urban(ized) modes of cultural consumption, but also to develop appreciation for *artistic values*. In this very aspect of cultural consumption the rural and semi-rural masses most visibly failed to meet the guidelines of the socialist cultural policies. As a result, newspaper stories like the 1962 *Borba*'s report on the Serbian village of Kusadak whose folk allegedly preferred jazz to folk music remained in the sphere of media curiosities. (Janjetović, 2011b: 76) The commercial success and social significance of NNM (both in rural and urban contexts) became the most striking symptom of this political failure.

Those in charge (including the Adornian critics of mass culture) labelled the newly-composed folk music as a *caricature of mass culture* and ultimate instance of *surrogate for an authentic culture* (opposed, as such, to the idealized notion of 'pure, original folk songs'). The end product of this process was perceived as 'fake folklore' – or, rather, 'fakelore' (Anastasijević, 1988: 151) – and tagged as *kitsch* or *schund*. This assessment brought about anti-*schund* legal acts, special tax rates for the products of the NNM industry and occasional campaigns e.g. the notorious Congress of Cultural Action (held in Kragujevac, Serbia in 1971) aimed at 'decontamination' of the cultural life in the country from pulp and distasteful music forms (Hofman, 2013). These lofty efforts included occasional commissions of 'new folk songs' from respectable professional composers: however, this 'NNM for string orchestras' was heavily disliked by the audiences to the point of mass cancelling of radio subscription. (Luković, 1989: 70) Indeed, while the leading composers of 'light music' (*zabavna muzika*) were officially acknowledged (they could be regular members of The Union of Yugoslav Composers), this acknowledgement was denied to the creators of NNM.

Although, for the sake of illustration, of the 729 records released in Yugoslavia in 1972, 427 featured NNM performers (Gavarić, 1973: 155), the cultural discrimination of the genre sometimes assumed even inhuman aspects. When in 1976, Sil-

vana Armenulić, a true NNM diva (and a prime competitor to Lepa Lukić) died in a car accident with her sister, the nation was in mourning. However, the prime time news of the state television announced only the death of a fellow musician (Rade Jašarević) who was in the same car with the sisters (both NNM singers): he was the head of the Radio Television Belgrade's folk music orchestra and a 'member of RTB's collective'. (Marković, 2011: 10-16) Anyway, this discrimination and allegations of bad taste (golden teeth, hairy legs, white socks, flashy accessories and extravagant make-up, super-mini skirts and deep cleavages) did not considerably affect the income of the 'workers in entertainment industry'. *Kafana* musicians got paid twice as much as the holders of university degrees, and six times more than the regular *kafana* staff. In the late 1970s, the Yugoslavs apparently spent six times less on books than on alcohol, and 185 times less on books than in *kafanas* (Janjetović, 2011a: 94-95; 234). This was highly problematic from the standpoint of the officially proclaimed social values: along with star footballers, NNM celebrities were the prime targets of public protests over that aspect of social inequality. Indeed, the post-socialist evolution of the newly composed folk music into the notorious turbo-folk genre (marked by arbitrary blends of local – folkloric – and global pop music idioms and media industries), its enormous commercial success and overwhelming media presence had not considerably changed this basic accusation of pretence. In addition, NNM was perceived as „reinforcing perceptions of culture-core differences between Balkan and (western) European culture“ (Vuletic, 2010: 320) – namely, between Yugoslavia's eastern republics (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia), where the genre's audience and production was more concentrated, and the western ones (Croatia and Slovenia) where it lacked a proper foothold and audience base.

According to Milena Dragičević-Šešić (1994), *novokomponovana kultura* or *neofolk culture* had been a highly influential and probably prevailing cultural model in the post-war Yugoslavia – and NNM was its 'emblem'. (Kronja, 1999) Moreover, the popularity of NNM was perceived as the “most characteristic feature of the musical taste of the general public in Yugoslavia”. (Kos, 1972: 62) However (in the socialist period), since 1969 when the Third Program of Radio Belgrade hosted a panel on the 'new folk music' (Lukić *et al.*, 1970) few authors contributed to the academic debate on the subject (Ivanović, 1973; Lukić, 1975: 73-83; Čolović, 1985: 140-206). In the mid-1980s, when Dragičević-Šešić attempted to make her contribution, she was often asked the question: “Why do you mess with marginal stuff?” (*All that folk*, Episode 1). In 1983, when her colleague Branimir Stojković analysed the representations of mass culture in the influential youth journal *Student*, he noted a total absence of NNM from that picture. “According to *Student*, this realm of music life which is arguably the main preference of the solid majority of this country's population – does not even possess a negative relevance, namely, *as music*, it simply doesn't exist...” (Stojković, 1985: 144). Observing them as members of 'informal groups marked by interest in music', the academia even discovered that NNM lovers were 'subcultural' – contradicting own conclusions that NNM fans (with their modest outfits and ordinary language) were fairly indistinguishable from 'ordinary people' (Kronja, 1999; Dragičević-Šešić, 1994: 45).

In spite of being the prevailing form of mass culture in the country, NNM firmly

remained on the margins of academic interests. In Yugoslavia, this music had a 'past', but not a 'history'. This attitude toward the NNM reflects the culturally specific perception of history as an exclusive domain of 'cultural value' (Vidić-Rasmussen, 2002: 3-4). In any event, the observers of the phenomenon (academic or not) typically distanced themselves from the core audiences of NNM, adopting the position of outsiders with no active participation in the consumption of this music. The undisputable NNM star of the 1980s was Fahreta Jahić – Lepa Brena. Tall and blonde, she successfully brought together rural, semi-rural and urban audiences and unstopably crossed the borders between Yugoslav republics. She kept the spirit of unity within the feeble federation, which made her career seem largely as a state-sponsored project. Nevertheless, even the visitors of her concerts (when interviewed) felt uncomfortable in being seen as 'core audiences of NNM' (Dragičević-Šešić, 1994: 137-180).

3.2. The 'oriental' controversies

The last days of socialist Yugoslavia (along with the collapse of its institutions) saw the 'oriental' aspects of NNM identified with otherness – a cultural threat for various threads of the Yugoslav ethnic carpet. (Šentevska, 2013) Kept away from the mainstream media and routinely attacked by the cultural gatekeepers advocating authenticity in folk music, stars of the Serbian-Bosnian band *Južni vetar* (Southern Wind) – Dragana Mirković, Šemsa Suljaković, Sinan Sakić, Mile Kitić, Kemal Malovčić etc. were seen as the most striking exponents of 'oriental kitsch'. Lead by the instrumentalist Miodrag Ilić 'Mile Bas', later maliciously referred to as 'Mile Teheran', they nevertheless enjoyed enormous popularity and a firm fan base. (Vidić-Rasmussen, 1996: 105-108; Nikolić, 2008) *Gastarbeiters* (low-income workforce 'imported' by wealthy Western countries, notably West Germany) (Marković, 2007; Daniel, 2007) were seen as the main culprits for such a wide incorporation of Oriental music influence into the Yugoslav NNM. The situation bears comparison with Turkey (*arabesk*) and Israel (*mizrahi*) where respective music genres were charged with similar accusations of 'inappropriate' Oriental leanings (Stokes, 2000; Stokes 1992; Robins, 1996).

Against the background of the general economic decline and ambiguity of political direction in the late 1980s, this 'oriental controversy' was no more than the surface manifestation of the political crisis. According to Ljerka Vidić-Rasmussen, it appears, in retrospect, as a metaphor for Yugoslavia, "a casualty of its own strategy: positioning itself politically and culturally between the West and an imagined East, yet failing to reconcile the resulting overlap internally". (Vidić-Rasmussen, 1996: 116)

With the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia and armed conflicts throughout its former territory, the well-elaborated discourse of 'NNM contamination' assumed a new political context (Gordy, 1999; Jansen, 2005). 'Anatolian howling' disrupting the *national soundscape* was no longer a metaphorical expression of musical dislike. The war was real, and attempts at 'de-orientalisation' of Serbian folk music obtained firm political ground. In a famous example, Serbian (opposition) MP Pavle Aksentijević (a notable singer of Medieval spiritual music), at a July 1994 parliament session, brought a tape recorder to the podium and played a tape of a popular Iranian song. This was followed by a song by Dragana Mirković, prima donna of turbo-folk, in an attempt at demonstration that the tunes were almost identical. At the same time, his

political opponent, mayor of Svilajnac and representative of the Socialist Party of Serbia Dobrivoje Budimirović Bidža was making a 'political' statement happily belly-dancing. In a 'self-orientalising' manner (Georgiev, 2012) and in 'rueful self-recognition' (Herzfeld, 1987) Aksentijević concluded this 'performance' by quoting the communist historian Vladimir Dedijer: „We Serbs sometimes behave as if we were made ('begotten') by drunken Turks“ (Živković, 1998; see also Maksimović, 2009). Even the all-Yugoslav pop icon Đorđe Balašević positively hated to see urban kids, born in a big city, who sang turbo-folk songs, attached to a primitive, oriental music he had despised for years (Jansen, 2005: 127). In the same 1993 interview for *Globus* (Zagreb) he said: “I come from Novi Sad, which is on the other side of the border which separated the Ottoman Empire from Austria-Hungary. I have 500 years on my side”. On the other side of this imaginary border, the war-zone reality disclosed different preferences: under the siege in Sarajevo, a market seller when asked why he sold the music of the notorious Serbian turbo-folk star Svetlana Ražnatović Ceca, (in)famously retorted: “Art knows no borders”. (Dimitrijević B, 2001) Similarly, a journalist from Serbia (Zoran Ćirjaković) found himself in early 1996 the conduit for a number of Serbian turbo-folk albums requested by soldiers of the Bosnian Army – “Turbo-folk was the only Serb product that the suffering and almost ethnically clean post-war Sarajevo yearned for”. (Ćirjaković, 2004)

“It is rather paradoxical that on this very subject – attitude towards the oriental elements in the music and visual imagery of turbo-folk performers – our nationalists and internationalists share a common understanding: the former wish to defend the purity of Serbian music against oriental features, and the latter – allegedly pro-European cosmopolitans – want to suppress them as part of the oriental, despotic legacy of primitivism that blocks our progress towards the 'world', Europe, the West...” (Đurković, 2001: 30). In a 'post-1990s' TV program (*All that folk*, Episode 4) turbo-folk star singer of Roma origin Džej Ramadanovski (in his comment on the global, world music industry) protested the narrow-mindedness of the Serbian music business: “They (corporations) took everything Turkish, everything Arabic, put everything Indian on tape, wherever there is a Muslim head – they took it all. And that's OK, and when we pick up something from the Turks ... that's no good, that's Islam”. However, the process of 'de-orientalisation' of Serbian folk music is still ongoing. In a recent interview, Saša Popović, manager of Grand Production, close associate of Lepa Brena and 'arguably the most powerful man in Serbian show business' claimed that he contributed greatly „to expelling the *turcizam* and other kinds of music that have nothing to do with our *narodna*“. According to Popović, when Grand was launched in 1998 the music scene in Serbia was “full of Arabic melodies, Indian tunes, covers, thefts, all kinds of things... To cleanse the music from everything we found there was a far-reaching, responsible and, most of all, difficult job. It is still an ongoing process...” (Popović, 2013).

3.3. Turbo-folk as a social issue

Heavy media exposure of turbo-folk in the 1990s provoked numerous commentators to label this music culture as camouflage of the harsh social reality in Serbia (UN sanctions, armed conflicts with the neighbouring countries, economic downfall) with the

'pink' machinery of compulsive entertainment. Turbo-folk, the 'soundtrack' of the regime of Slobodan Milošević's (Luković, 1992) and 'analgesic for the gravely ill society' was seen as music for gangsters: those who made a fortune in smuggling, racketeering, selling drugs or (backed by the authorities) through their own 'efforts' at the war front. Turbo-folk became the 'music of isolation' and 'ethnic cleansing' (Hudson, 2003), the sexy escort of Serbian 'porn nationalism' or 'Balkan hardcore' (Monroe, 2000). Even the international admirers of TF mainly praised its 'intimacy between music and terrorism'. In the words of the cyberpunk author Bruce Sterling: "There you have my first image, the famous turbo-folk singing star Ceca sitting on the lap of Arkan, indicted war criminal and terrorist... It's kind of hard to get a closer, more intimate, loving relationship between music and terrorism" (Sterling, 2003).

In the first anti-war concerts in Serbia rock musicians expressed their resentment with Milošević's war-mongering politics with the message '*nećemo da pobedi narodna muzika*' (we do not want folk music to take over). When the turbo-folk star Dragan Kojić Keba offered to express his support for the students' anti-government protests in 1996 with a gig, he was kindly refused and his complementary CD was not played at the rallies. Eventually, this oversimplified formula 'rock good = turbo-folk bad' proved to be rather misleading in the Serbian context: protagonists of the same music genres have all too often adopted ideologically opposite positions.

Even the exponents of Milošević's regime became aware of the bad reputation associated with patronizing turbo-folk. The most prominent institutional response to the accusations of *nekultura* (annoying absence of culture) was the launch of the ambitious public campaign of the Ministry of Culture in February 1995 (*Lepše je sa kulturom* – It's nicer with culture) commissioned from the Belgrade affiliate of Saatchi & Saatchi Advertising. On the other side of the political spectrum, in March 1995 the oppositional *Demokratski centar* hosted a conference on cultural policies in Serbia, titled (in a somewhat 'old-fashioned manner') *Kultura kao samoodbrana društva i ličnosti* (Culture as self-defence of society and individuals). At this conference the criticism targeting folk music for the masses did not considerably differ from the rhetoric of the Ministry of Culture. Even the suggested solutions to major problems were similar to those the Ministry proposed (but failed to implement). Some of them even bordered comedy relief: e.g. improving the musical culture of the nation by playing Bach in public buses.

The *uncultured* world of turbo-folk is over-populated by young women in super-mini-skirts who drive super-expensive cars. Their basic preoccupations are "Coca Cola, Marlboro, Suzuki, discotheques, guitars and bouzouki" as encapsulated by Viki (Violeta) Miljković in her 1994 hit *Nikom nije lepše nego nama* (Nobody's having a better time than us). They all live in super-big houses and spend quality time in fancy hotel bars, described by the *Architectural Encyclopedia of Belgrade* as turbo-architecture – a "malignant variety of postmodernism" (Bogunović, 2005: 1447). Their glamorous villas (featuring arbitrarily combined elements of remote origins in ancient Rome and Ottoman Anatolia) are seen as the most visible manifestations of both the arrogance and self-perception of the political, war profiteering and show business 'élites'. Guarded by cast concrete lions, those fairy-tale castles are also perceived as "arias of the Serbian architectural soap opera". (Prodanović, 2002: 99) As it happens, the para-

digmatic monuments of this architectural style are the family house of Ceca and Željko Ražnatović (Arkan) and headquarters of the Pink TV network (major media promoter of turbo-folk) in the posh Belgrade neighbourhood of Dedinje. According to Eric Gordy, all this turbo-folk glitter serves an additional ideological purpose: rendered in glamorous and romantic hues, lifestyles of the new criminalized elites became normal, acceptable i.e. legitimate (1999). In this context (and not only in this neighbourhood), the only social visibility that matters is the visibility of extremely rich social groups.

Turbo-folk stars are no longer “lonely picaresque figures coming to the capital city, conquering the space, implicitly representing marginalized, provincial folks who ‘made it in the city’” (as did their NNM predecessors – for instance, Silvana Armenulić or even Lepa Brena). Like Ceca, they emerge as “totally and ultimately urbanized”, since they are not merely ‘adjusting’ to the city imaginary: they are in effect *re-writing* the city imaginary... Moreover, according to Marija Grujić, this ‘urbanization’ helped the turbo-folk stars verify their status as pop culture icons and (like Ceca) as national heroines, ‘mothers of the nation’ and ‘queens of the social elite’ (Grujić, 2012: 138–139).

The first years of the 21st century saw Serbia confronting consequences of the grave political, social and post-war legacy of the Milošević era which made the processes of economic, institutional and value transformations of the society extremely difficult to accomplish. The new elite from the 1990s seamlessly merged with media tycoons and the new economic and political oligarchy from the post-Milošević governments. “Boulevard papers replaced the exponents of the former regime with new characters, but in their features turbo-folk stars, faith healers, astrologists, criminals, strippers, models and conspiracy theorists still occupied the front lines of the social life in Serbia” (Kronja, 2001b: 16). “In Serbia, politicians are the biggest stars,” claims Svetlana Ceca Ražnatović (*All that folk*, Epizode 5). In 2001 *Ceca Nazionale* found herself at No.2 of the list *Top 10 Biggest Media Stars in Serbia* (Dimitrijević N, 2001: 35), featuring:

Vojislav Koštunica (President)
 Svetlana Ceca Ražnatović (turbo-folk star)
 Slobodan Milošević (ex-President)
 Savo Milošević (football star)
 Džej Ramadanovski (turbo-folk star)
 Milovan Ilić Minimaks (talk show host)
 Vlade Divac (basketball star)
 Zoran Đinđić (Prime Minister, assassinated in 2003)
 Kleo Patra (astrologist)
 Aca Lukas (turbo-folk star)

According to Branislav Dimitrijević, the Serbian post-socialist aesthetics of *idealized West* (Simic, 2002) – embodied in luxury cars, half-naked girls, abundance of gold, weapons, crosses and other patriotic insignia – mirrors the aesthetics of turbo-folk (Dimitrijević B, 2001). On the other hand, criticism of turbo-folk is “still part of

the ‘language of power’ in contemporary Serbia, at all levels, including police”. Ethnologist Ivan Čolović described an initiative by Miloš Janković, high official of the Ministry of Justice, who decided to ban turbo-folk from Serbian prisons due to bad influence on the “psycho-physical condition of the inmates”. (Čolović, 2006: 260–261) Indeed, many are lead to believe that in the public debates in Serbia turbo-folk serves mainly as an “ideological label” (Đurković, 2002): right-leaning critics claim that TF undermined the Serbian identity in times of national crisis, while the left wing blames TF for boosting nationalism in times when it should have been suppressed. Thus *novokomponovanost* (‘newly-composedness’) associated with the historical origins of turbo-folk “becomes the one and only true Serbian *brand*”, adorned in fake patriotism and nationalism and imposed from the ‘higher instances’ as an “all-acceptable value and civilizational achievement” (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, 2006: 219).

As a social issue, turbo-folk was perhaps best defined by the Serbian publicist Bogdan Tirnanić (1995): “Our culture is not in a lethal crisis due to the savage offensive of turbo-folk: to the contrary, turbo-folk as ‘our destiny’ is an end result of the final breakdown of a false value system imposed for many decades by the local elites”.

3.4. The good sides of turbo-folk

Nevertheless, there are other views on the turbo-folk phenomenon. Goran Bregović, the ultimate rock-star of socialist Yugoslavia (while he was the lead guitarist, composer and lyricist of the band *Bijelo dugme* from Sarajevo), and now a respectable ‘world musician’, said in an interview: “Perhaps someone really thinks that we have something better than this turbo-folk. To be honest, I do not see anything better around here”. At the time (in 2005), he received a honorary doctorate in music from the University of Sheffield. In the same interview he added: “If I were to choose whether I should be remembered as honorable doctor in music... or as a founder of turbo-folk, without thinking for a second – founder of turbo-folk”. (Pećanin, 2005)

Others opine that turbo-folk is the only *authentic* contemporary Serbian pop music, indeed misrepresented as a product of Milošević’s criminalized regime. Moreover, the question of understanding and evaluation of turbo-folk acutely reflects the country’s key political problem: “Serbia’s liberal elite... is still chained to false stereotypes and incapable of communicating with the major part of the population it aspires to govern and lead...” (Ćirjaković, 2004) Zoran Ćirjaković relates turbo-folk to the concepts of ‘alternate modernities’ (Arjun Appadurai) and ‘provincialization of Europe’ (Dipesh Chakrabarti). Namely, as a popular culture turbo-folk helps the ‘subalterns’ of Serbia deal with “the painful and often traumatic acceptance of the neo-liberal agenda”. In turbo-folk, one finds (at the same time) confusing and inventive combinations of remnants of folkloric past and tokens of Western modernity: this *mélange* is nevertheless “present in every one of us”. Turbo-folk also helps us understand why post-colonial experience is relevant for comprehending „our post-communist condition“. (Ćirjaković, 2013) In addition, turbo-folk might be a rare phenomenon which (consciously or not) re-interprets the cosmopolitanism of the ‘Ottoman oecumene’ (Buchanan, 2007) in the contemporary Balkan context.

Art theorist Branislav Dimitrijević further argues that turbo-folk had been the only victim of the anti-Milošević ‘October Revolution’ (5 October 2000): this ‘sacri-

fiće' was made with a purpose to camouflage the essential ideological-pragmatic continuity between the old and the new governments. Turbo-folk is occasionally seen as claiming a special position in the contemporary Serbian culture: notwithstanding the criticism coming from all sides it is, at the same time, its dominant mainstream and 'undercover subversion'. (Dimitrijević B, 2001) Some authors (Dimitrijević among them) even credit turbo-folk with 'radical potential', usually reserved for the realm of contemporary visual art. In a nutshell, turbo-folk demonstrates that Serbia leans towards the West more than anyone is ready to admit. Nevertheless, according to Marija Grujić and other feminist critics (Gržinić, 2001: 20; Kronja, 2001a; Papić, 2002) it is questionable whether we can *really* discuss any form of political or social subversion in turbo-folk extravaganzas (over-sexualization and crossing the boundaries of taste, class, cultural divisions and genres...) Namely, "it is not clear who are the 'official' or 'institutional' elites" – against which this 'subversion' should be directed. (Grujić, 2012: 153)¹¹

4. Balkans goes 'turbo' – Orientalist discourses on the 'modernized folk music' and the new Balkan elites

In the post-Yugoslav context, turbo-folk operates as "a conceptual category which aggregates connotations of banality, foreignness, violence and kitsch in order to provide a critical apparatus with a ready-made strategy of distancing" (Baker, 2009: 139). "Looking at turbo-folk from the development of NNM during socialist Yugoslavia to the present day in Serbia and Croatia", says Rory Archer, "a coherent trend emerges whereby turbo-folk is criticized in terms of its poor aesthetics, its alleged rural or newly urbanized character and its oriental properties. In Serbia this orient is considered to be both the Turkish/Islamic other and the internal Serbian orient, the south of Serbia (*južna pruga*). In Croatia the oriental quality of turbo-folk is heightened by the additional Serbian association" (namely, association with the 'insubordinate' Serbian minority) (Archer, 2009: 73).¹²

Nevertheless, similar music forms perform similar scapegoat roles throughout the Balkan Peninsula. For instance, in Romania, *musică orientală* is criticized on similar terms for its 'alien sounds', 'contamination' and 'banality' (Beissinger, 2007: 131). In Albania "perhaps the most striking aspect of *muzika popullore* is how much Albanians love to say they hate it" (Sugarman, 2007: 289). The criticism revolves around three main points: 1) *shund* (garbage) / *kiq* (kitsch); 2) *katunarë* (peasant); and 3) *orientalizu* (oriental), *frymë turke* (Turkish) or *magjupsu* (Roma) (Archer, 2009: 63). In Kosovo, one can hear complaints like: "Albanians are a Western people, but this music (*muzika popullore*) had orientaled Albanians a great deal. The Serbs have imposed this music on us as to associate the Albanians with the Orient, fundamentalism, and the like. This is not our culture", etc. (Sugarman, 2007: 296)

¹¹ For recent overviews of the academic 'turbo-folk debate', see Tomić 2014 (in German), Šentevska 2014. See also: Čvoro 2014: 29-104.

¹² See also Archer 2012.

As for Bulgaria, “a famous conductor in an interview in 1998 said that *chalga* was the only thing that would make him emigrate from Bulgaria” (Rice, 2002: 38). Among the members of the intellectual elite *chalga* widely claims the title of the worst music in the world. As we have seen, it did emerge from a popular music style which before 1989 had no presence in the media and was typically associated with the lower strata of the society. According to the Bulgarian-German scholar Katerina Gehl, since the end of the 1990s the so-called *chalga-culture* has come to *dominate* both the public and the private sector in Bulgaria. Nowadays it represents a whole cultural complex, with own behavioural patterns, values, attitudes, attributes and aesthetics. Moreover, it has become an identity-generating phenomenon, granted a status of an *authentic* Bulgarian culture.

Steven Sampson described four types of new elites emerging in the *post-post-socialism* (PPS) period: a local political class, a comprador bourgeoisie of business people or NGO project staff (Euro-elites), a domestic business elite, and in areas of conflict, warlords and mafia chieftains (Sampson, 2002). In the Bulgarian context, perhaps with the exception of ‘Euro-elites’, *chalga* has been accepted by all power elites, who legitimize themselves in the society by promoting and exposing it in the public sphere. In effect, “this strategy is leading Bulgaria further and further away from the proclaimed internalization of ‘European’ values and standards”. (Gehl, 2010: 44)

While studying how ordinary citizens view the social structure of Serbia, sociologist Ivana Spasić came to a conclusion that *legitimate* upper class is missing from this picture. What is described as ‘elite’ – more precisely, ‘quasi’ or ‘pseudo’ elite – is essentially illegitimate (Spasić, 2006: 162-163). Namely, “Bourdieu’s research on these questions in France assumes that stable, class-differentiated publics already exist, socialized into certain patterns of recognition of the entitlements of others. This assumption is clearly wrong for East European socialist societies, in which a situation of stably socialized groups orienting to a more or less secure set of values was precisely what the political authorities had hoped to achieve but did not” (Verdery, 1991: 18). In Bourdieu’s description of the French society, social groups occupying the lower strata aspire to ‘climb the ladder’ or at least present themselves as already occupying a higher position than they actually do. However, they do not attempt to change the ‘architecture of the ladder’. In Serbia, according to Spasić, the biggest problem is the ladder. This implies a lack of consensus on the ‘legitimate’ and, consequently, on the ‘elite culture’. ‘Highly cultivated taste’, as a firmly defined preference of any social rank, simply does not exist in this society. Thus, according to the daily shifts of political power, exponents of this or that cultural model may claim high institutional positions in the state apparatus, in absence of a ‘common sense’ public consensus on their merits and cultural competence. In other words, in Serbia, high culture does not necessarily claim the status of *legitimate* culture. (Cvetičanin, 2012: 55) Since members of the highest echelons of the political leadership of the country (regardless of their political affiliations) find it not only appropriate, but also advantageous to perform turbo-folk hits in public (or attend turbo-folk concerts, for that matter) this can only mean that legitimization of once despised forms of popular culture (by political and intellectual elites alike) goes hand in hand with political legitimization and mass support at the elections.

5. Conclusion

This article addresses the role of folk music industry in the symbolic divisions, identity reshaping (national and cultural) and formation of the new elites of the post-socialist Balkans, drawing from different academic disciplines (sociology, anthropology, ethnology, history, media and gender studies, musicology, art theory, architecture and urban studies). Our emphasis is on the official policies and academic debates surrounding the characteristic genres of ‘modernized folk music’ in two countries, Serbia (turbo-folk) and Bulgaria (chalga). The case of Serbia is more pronounced and used to demonstrate in more depth (i) the historical background of the turbo-folk phenomenon; (ii) its perception as a modern recidivism of a backward Oriental legacy; (iii) other points of criticism of turbo-folk; and (iv) main points of its defence from (unfounded) criticism. The chapter on Serbia also traces the changing attitudes of the elite members of the society (political and intellectual) towards the cultural phenomenon of ‘modernized folk music’.

Serbia and Bulgaria share a history of mutual influences and exchange in the realm of popular culture (especially music) untypical for the Balkan region in the Cold War period. This unofficial exchange often went against the official policies and dynamics of the shifting diplomatic relations between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria in the socialist period. In the early 1990s, during the restructuring of the media industry in both countries toward deregulation and privatization of media outlets, this unofficial history brought about new channels of exchange of personnel and know-how. Turbo-folk and chalga (both colloquial but widely adopted terms) may thus be perceived as two names of (more or less) the same music, which has many counterparts and local varieties throughout the Balkans (and, indeed, in the much wider area of post-Soviet Central Asia or Middle East). This article describes it as a complex cultural phenomenon, deeply connected to the questions of political legitimacy in the post-socialist context.

Accordingly, our discussion of the cultural reception of turbo-folk depicts a quest for legitimacy of a (still) ambivalent and contested, yet largely dominant cultural paradigm in the region, including its characteristic patterns of cultural consumption and value systems attached. In view of that discussion, Mira Škorić’s statement which gave a title to this article (*To put it simply, turbo-folk rules!*) symbolically proclaims the complete turn that the conceptions of ‘high’ and ‘low’, ‘elite’ and ‘popular’, ‘legitimate’ and ‘merely tolerated’ cultural models and forms underwent in the post-socialist period.

This complete turn, in fact, means that in the Balkans the concept of legitimate, ‘pure’ national culture (official high culture shaped according to the standards of the modernizing European West) gave way to the formerly ‘illegitimate’ (unofficial), hybrid forms of transnational Balkan popular culture, embraced and promoted by the new political, economic and cultural elites as the new dominant (legitimate) culture. Is this process leading us in the Balkans “further away from the proclaimed internalization of ‘European’ values and standards” or is it drawing us closer to the core of the contemporary transformations of the globalized ‘world culture’ is another open question for debate.

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