

Dr Miša Đurković
Senior Associate
Institute for European Studies, Belgrade

Dimitrije Vujadinović
Balkankult Foundation, Belgrade

**PRACTICE OF POPULAR MUSIC IN SERBIA
BETWEEN GLOBALIZATION OF THE MARKET AND THE AUTHENTICITY OF COMPLEX
HERITAGE (1)**

Globalization as an increasingly intense process is constantly presenting challenges for all ethnic communities regarding their interpretation and the redefining of their identity. The two most common replies made at the end of the public and political spectrum is a discourse of defense of essentially perceived identity and the opposing discourse on the end of local and special identities which as a result of globalization sees one universal (corporative?) culture in which individual identities are constantly being redefined.

The fate, treatment and public disputes about the practices and politics of folklore in Serbia today can contribute greatly to a better understanding of the problems and questions a researcher of this field encounters.

The text we are presenting will attempt to briefly present some of the more important points of the aforementioned problems.

*

Serbia is one of the central Balkan countries which is, because of its geographical and geopolitical location and incredibly complex historical heritage, like an infinitely complex mosaic of religious, local, ethnic and other identities. This variety, segmentarity and historical multi-layering is obvious simply by looking at the demographic structure of the Serbian population, and maybe even more apparent by taking a look at the practice of popular music. **(2)**

Serbia as a part of Yugoslavia as opposed to other communist countries at the end of the 60's has had a very developed music industry and a large market for popular music in which some music stars have sold over a million records. Thanks to this fact, a natural development was enabled for artists to create and shape the folklore heritage of certain nations, to create mixtures, to modernize their production and expressions, and to occasionally use elements from Greek, South American and later on Turkish popular music. Also, since the beginning of the 70's, authors of the dominant neo-folk music started borrowing elements from disco, Western pop music as well as Rock n roll (introducing the electric guitar and riffs). On the other hand, rockers started using local folklore heritage therefore becoming true pioneers of the future world music scene (The best example is the rock band of Goran Bregovic- *Bijelo Dugme*)

Thanks to everything mentioned, Serbia has avoided the sterilization which is characteristic of other communist countries as depicted in the novel „Joke“ by Milan Kundera, which accepted only osified

folklore creations and artistic music. In Yugoslavia, including Serbia, the whole model was already set and tested, but in the 90's despite all that it went through a radical transformation because of the wars, hyperinflation and spreading of media pluralism and domination of the destitute market which was created after the country fully retired from the sphere of cultural politics.

Except for the Serbian population (which is nationally homogenous but very heterogeneous depending on locality, time of settlement rural/urban dwelling), there is a large number of other ethnic communities in the country – in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina alone there are 23 ethnic groups.

It is very interesting and indicative to see how their practice of popular music functions and what their relationship is with the dominant mainstream.

Let's begin with the perception of the last diaspora. Over the last 20 years in Serbia tens of thousands of Chinese have immigrated. They are mostly concentrated in Belgrade, but their communities own so-called Chinese shops in a large number of cities where low-quality goods are sold for cheap, which attracts the poorer layers of society. A simple observation concludes that they de facto do not exist in the public sphere. The Chinese exist in a completely non-integrated isolated community which has so far not shown interest in joining the existing cultural life. The number of mixed marriages is still very low. They do not have their own television or radio programs nor TV shows. Their cultural product from this region is unknown to other citizens and there is only a handful of attempts where members of the Chinese community have interpreted songs in the Serbian language. On the other hand it is important to note that Serbia is not an exception here compared to similar examples in other countries and one of the main reasons is the language barrier as well as the tendency for the Chinese communities to exist as a separate country within a country.

The situation is somewhat better regarding other minorities in Serbia. Several studies regarding for example festivals of minorities creativity have shown a large amount of sterility, repetitiveness, and isolation of such events. **(3)**

The country itself sets aside the means to encourage minorities creativity – this is especially insisted upon because of the bad image Serbia has gained in the 90's. The organization is handed to minority councils and local communities. However, the results are very weak. It turns out the audience is usually tied to the members of the same community. Whether it's for lack of willpower or capability, the organizers are not able to gain the interest of the rest of the population. According to the rule, authenticity is required and the pattern of preservation of unchanged heritage is affirmed.

So the possibilities for a wider affirmation, interesting interpretations and development of ethnic creativity are lost, and avoiding modernization leads to decreased interest of young people from the same community who are far more interested in modern content, be they global pop culture or Serbian mainstream. Some of them are trying to succeed and affirm themselves in this area, but unfortunately there are no examples of modernized minority creativity presented to a wider audience which could be productive in the market. **(4)**

There are, however, very successful examples and a good foundation for such a practice. The tradition of Hungarian *cardasz* is very prevalent in the region of Vojvodina but is also widely popular throughout Serbia. One of the most popular pop singers in this area is Djordje Balasevic from Novi Sad who often borrowed elements from Hungarian music. Moreover, some of his biggest hits widely accepted by multi-ethnic audiences are composed in this manner. Even more important is the rich practice of Zvonko Bogdan, member of the minority Bunjevac community in Vojvodina who in his performances and recordings synthesized the atmosphere and heritage of Panonian multiculturalism in which it is easy to recognize the contributions of various ethnic groups. He sings in multiple languages in his performances.

Unfortunately, modern music practice does not offer artists who will adequately continue these very successful predecessors. Just like in many other cases, there is room and demand on the market but there is no one to fulfill it with a quality which would create new interesting results by following old traditions.

Another interesting case is that of the Vlach minority living in Northeastern Serbia. These partially christianized people have completely maintained their pagan heritage characterized by very lively animism, as well as a very rich folklore practice. It encompasses elegies, sorcerer songs, curses, culture of ritual breads, diverse practice of burial rituals which includes, for example, dancing at the cemetery, a very interesting practice of folklore sexuality, etc... Accompanying all these rituals we see a characteristic form of music which is a constant subject of research by ethnologists in Serbia. Vlach folklore music has gained the attention of the Serbian population.

The problem with Vlach heritage is also because of a lack of contemporary attempts to modernize this rich practice and make it accessible to the wider public. A positive example is the success of ethno artist Biljana Krstic who included several contemporary produced interpretations of Vlach songs in her debut album.

The situation is different with the Muslim, or rather what they are called now, the Bosnian minority in Serbia. Thanks to sharing the same language (as well as heritage and mentality), the proliferation of Serbian and Muslim music has been huge, to the extent that it was often impossible to tell them apart.

The basic categorization of Serbian songs (Šumadija and Morava doubles) and Bosnian ones did not have an ethnic but rather a territorial note. Bosnian songs have equally encompassed both Serbs and Muslims whose utmost achievement was the popular *sevdalinka* (melancholic song). In Yugoslavia all those artists belonged to the same genre, so, for example, at weddings today among both Bosnians and Serbs, a very similar, practically identical selection of songs are played from the so-called 70's and 80's classics.

However, an even more numerous community are authentic muslims from Serbia which are an integral part of this region's heritage. Among them there are some of the most popular and most influential artists such as Saban Saulic and Sinan Sakic. Their population is mostly concentrated in Western and Southwestern Serbia. In the middle of the 80's they have created an indirect influence in the promotion and integration of oriental sounds within the practice of popular music as a whole. Through their repertoire came emphasized melismas, phrases and entire songs from Turkey, Iran and

other Islamic regions. By the end of the 80's this has crystalized into a genre of its own (around the South Wind orchestra) which had great success, but caused big controversies among the public being viewed as a new Turkish cultural occupation over Serbia.

The dispute centering on the status of oriental heritage among the Serbs and in the State of Serbia is the most important one in the field of popular music. For the most part, it is actually linked to the proliferation of the Serbian musical practice inspired by Roma art and heritage in these parts. In addition to the Serbs, Roma are the only population evenly dispersed throughout Serbia. That is the reason why they have inherited and embraced a variety of musical traditions: in the northern part of the country there are famous *tamburitza* bands playing old town music and *bećarci* (humorous folk songs) in classical middle Europe tradition of major/minor scales; in central and Western Serbia the bands are based on violin and accordion performing music in the rhythm of the Serbian double; the most interesting and most famous of all bands beyond any doubt are trumpeters from the South and Southeast of Serbia playing in the typical oriental style characterized by an uneven rhythm.

Ever since the time of Turkish rule, the Roma have enjoyed a specific status of entertainers which is why they outnumber other performers among popular musicians and in wedding bands. Some of them have become genuine mainstream stars in Serbia, like Usnija Redžepova, Šaban Bajramović, who recently got a monument in the town of Niš or Dzej Ramadanovski.

Extremely complex issues have come to the fore thanks to the craft and success of Roma trumpet bands in Southern Serbia. A vehicle that propelled this music to world fame was the enormous commercial success of Emir Kusturica's movie *Underground* in the European market. The movie also won a major award in the Cannes film festival in 1995. The music composed by Goran Bregović was performed by two most famous Roma bands, led by Slobodan Salijević and Boban Marković. These dionisian sounds, especially two major scores, became virtual national anthems of Serbia and are also performed at various entertainment events in many other countries.

As a result, interest in a traditional trumpet festival in Guča (central Serbia) skyrocketed. Over time, this event has become overly commercialized and its traditional character linked to the observance of major religious holidays and celebration of the traditions of Serbian military music (marches and folk songs from the region of Užice) has considerably changed.

After 1995, new audiences welcomed free-wheeling Roma bands which became rather popular. Indeed, an interesting trend emerged whereby in addition to Serbian and Roma marches, *cocek* and traditional songs, they included pop and rock in their music, as well as Latino standards and other famous music scores causing discontent among the original founders of this event. It also provoked public debates on the meaning and future of this event (attended by close to a million people) and of popular music in Serbia in general.

In the meantime, the band of Boban Marković has become famous in the international scene setting the stage throughout Europe for other bands from these parts. Still, their music and performance style started to pander to commercial taste.

In the changed social and economic context of the 1990s, the above tendencies have had a critical affect on the practice of popular music, the Serbs themselves and the entire Serbian public. The preponderance of commercial genres labeled «turbo-folk» was more than evident. They brought together the elements of traditional folklore, ultra-modern productions with rhythm machines or even drum and bass rhythm tracks taken over from modern musical productions from Turkey, Greece and other Eastern Mediterranean countries and explicitly melismatic singing, and with the fashion style of brazenly dressed black R & B female singers. For the most part, this production can be rightfully labeled as kitsch designed for everyday consumption. Still, since the „turbo-folk“ entertainment industry brings huge amounts of money, certain business and political circles demonstrated an interest in it, especially commercial media companies. **(5)**

Unfortunately, over the past ten years public and academic debate has been exclusively limited to a debate on the political nature and desirability of folk i.e. „turbo-folk“ production, while a serious analysis of aesthetic and value norms is obviously lacking including a cultural policy that would encourage the promotion of artistically more desirable and ethnologically based valuable forms of folk musical expression. **(6)**

Essentially, the Serbian public seems to be more attracted to popular practice of its minorities and other prevailing trends on the global scene. Moreover, after the year 2000, there is a clear tendency to overwhelmingly acknowledge minority performance practices due to political correctness concerns and certain a perception related to the world music label.

According to some, Serbia is overly prone to such tendencies since there is not even a hint of a cultural policy which would take lead and reaffirm authentic creativity or high-quality modern production based upon it. **(7)**

.....

- 1) The text is part of the research paper *Protecting Folklore Heritage and Cultural Politics in Serbia*, whose authors work for the Serbian Ministry of Culture.
- 2) According to a 2002 census, 23 ethnic communities were living in Serbia. Over the entire territory of Serbia national minorities make up 18% of the total population, while over the Northern territory of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina minorities make up 35%.
- 3) In the study – *Festival Culture in Vojvodina*, which was done by Balkankult associates, 157 cultural festivals have been analyzed. This is the total number of »festival culture« in Vojvodina. The cultural identity presented in the programs of certain festivals of national minorities is an expression of a need to maintain a cohesive community. The cultural identity gives its place to creative identity. A number of festivals resulted in: content repetition, national identity formed into cultural identity in small communities turns into *malicious differentiation* (Wablen).
Folklore and amateur festivals: represent a continuation of folk ceremonies; held in traditional settings; smaller towns and villages; most festivals had the basic goal of maintaining social cohesion; non-existent connection between traditional and contemporary; dominant budget financing; the creative potential is in the function of affirming the cultural *national identity), which often results in provincialism; the target audience is of the same national minority.
Facts about the categorization based on content orientation are particularly interesting (complex phenomenon): Support for cultural identity; artistic and performance creativity.

- 4) Local authorities, including the Secretariat for Culture of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, are modestly helping the work of cultural-artistic communities in villages. The culture of these organizations is alive, dynamic and representative. It exists in villages but also within factories, city cultural institutes and private societies. The heritage they maintain, promote internationally and develop with the help of choreographers, is slowly leaking into other forms of popular culture, fashion, etc... Therefore folk dance ensembles are so well received globally, but authorities are systematically avoiding using them as a means of cultural diplomacy. So therefore we have the private initiative in Serbia coming out as the strongest instrument of promotion for creative interpretation of folklore heritage (the best example is the *Orchestra for Weddings and Funerals* of Goran Bregovic and the opera *Time of the Gypsies* by Emir Kusturica).
- 5) The Board of Culture of one of the more important political parties in Serbia has suggested last year to the Ministry of Culture a special tax to be implemented on kitsch, namely „turbo-folk“ music, with the goal of using the collected means to reinvest in capital culture projects. This sparked a lot of disputes, especially a reaction from the entertainment industry, and was not accepted.
- 6) This statement can be illustrated through a decades-long dispute over the place of traditional instrument of folklore art – *gusle*. Gusle, a single-stringed bowed instrument represents one of the basic mythological, historical and even sacred artifacts for the people of the Balkans especially in the regions of Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. With them and entire period of epic poetry was created, which is considered to be one of the most important products of nonmaterial heritage of the Balkans. Today they are a subject of dispute and controversy. Anthropologist and ethnologist Ivan Colovic is paradigm to the thesis of gusle as an anachronistic symbol (?) of nationalism, traditionalism and allegedly an instrument of war politics and hate speech, which should be confined to the museums. On the other hand, ethnomusicologist Jovana Papan analyzes the connection made between gusle and politically incorrect trends (wars, nationalism and anachronism) and how the cultural politics of Serbia, especially Montenegro, are systematically rejecting this tradition from public places, while promoting other (more “European”) instruments such as the tamburitza.
- 7) The country’s attitude towards folklore heritage is best illustrated by the amount of funds allotted for these activities from the republic budget for culture. From the total budget for culture and non-material cultural heritage (which includes folklore) between 8% and 9% was allotted in 2005, with less than 5% in 2007. From the republic budget for culture for non-material cultural heritage only 5,300,000 RSD (53,000 Euros) were intended, and for financing activities of ethnic communities 7,965,000 RSD (79,650 Euros) in 2010. In the planned budget of the Ministry of Culture for 2011, folklore creation is placed in the same category as archaeological research, museum heritage, library-informational activities and similar, so it is impossible to establish just how much money is going into financing folklore heritage. This tendency can only be interpreted as the government of Serbia not knowing how to use folklore programs and create context to lead contemporary cultural politics (to include it in contemporary creation, cultural diplomacy, cultural tourism and other).