

THE CONSEQUENCES OF REMITTANCES ON MOTHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS IN URBAN SERBIA

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ABSTRACT This article examines the consequences of remittances on kinship dynamics, especially on the mother-child relationship in a specific, post-conflict and post-communist context of urban Serbia. By framing remittances in a particular historical and social context, we will demonstrate how for ex-Yugoslav urban middle class remittances have become a gift that threatens to change the power within mother-child relationship, with a profound effect on the mothers left behind. Instead of bringing financial relief and security to elderly mothers, remittances cause them to make tremendous sacrifices to compensate for this gift and to affirm their social status and their identity as mothers.

Key words: Gender, remittances, Serbia, motherhood, mother-child relationship, social class

INTRODUCTION¹

This article is based on a twelve-month ethnographic research on relationships between adult migrant children and their elderly parents in

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1. I would like to thank Daniel Miller, Viviana Zelizer, colleagues at the Department of Anthropology at University College London and the European University Institute, also to the anonymous reviewer from the “Genero” journal, whose constructive comments were invaluable in improving this article. Obviously, I take the sole responsibility for any mistakes still remaining in the text.

urban Serbia, conducted in London and Belgrade during 2005 and 2006.² The focus of this research was the relationship between elderly parents in Belgrade and their migrant children in London, New York, Toronto, and other popular destinations for migrants, using the perspective of material culture to analyze the transformation of basic kinship ties between parents and children. Activities such as gifting practices, including those involving food, drink, household appliances, clothes, perfumes, books and money are shown to have a significant impact on social status both in the country of origin and the destination, on family relationships, and especially on the position of elderly women in Serbia. These provide valuable and original insights into parent-child dynamics in the context of post-conflict migration. The most contested genre was remittances, which, contrary to the prevailing development discourse,³ created humiliation and disgrace among elderly parents, in most cases mothers, in Belgrade, rather than financial relief and economic security.

It is important to note here that despite my best efforts to have a gender-balanced research sample, I found myself working mostly with women in Belgrade. Elderly mothers and grandmothers in Belgrade often outlive their spouses, and in cases where their husbands were still alive, there was a clear gender bias in relation to children. The elderly fathers had a very different reaction to their children's emigration and considered it in more rational terms,

2. The research included forty informants in Belgrade and another forty in London. In the Belgrade group of informants, there were only six men and the rest were women (most of my female informants outlived their spouses). Only two informants reported receiving (more or less) regular remittances from their migrant children; one of them was using remittances to supplement her low pension and the other one was saving the money for her children as an inheritance. In all other cases mothers insisted that money should travel from them to children, and not the other way round, no matter how hard they lived or what they had to sacrifice.

3. See 'Global Economic Prospects 2006: Economic Implications of Remittances and Migration' and 'International Migration, Remittances and the Brain Drain' both by the World Bank, 2006 and 2005 respectively; 'World Migration 2005' by the International Organization for Migration, 2005; 'Migration in an Interconnected World: New Directions for Action' by the Global Commission on International Migration, 2005. Also see Gammeltoft (2002), Glytsos (2002) Nyberg-Sørensen et al. (2002), Olesen (2002), Global Commission on International Migration (2005); Martinez et al. (2006), Ratha (2007).

while for mothers the departure of their children had a profound impact on their motherhood, creating a permanent rupture in their identity as mothers. This forms a part of the conclusion that for mothers, their children's migration from post-1990s Serbia represents not a gain, but a permanent, traumatic loss. This is not only a loss of their children, but also of their own identities as mothers and elderly matriarchs, divested of their final opportunity to gain power and recognition in the patriarchal Serbian society. This article aims to draw the attention to the importance of social class at the receiving end of remittance transfers and to the transformations in the mother-child relationship that occur as a consequence of remittances.

Considering the importance of remittances for studying migration, I expected that they would play a prominent role in my research into the relationship between Belgrade parents and their migrant children. Yet, contrary to my expectations, during the first eight months of fieldwork in London, remittances played only a marginal role in my research, since almost none of my research participants were sending money to Serbia. Remittances came to my attention only when I arrived in Belgrade for the second part of the fieldwork, with parents whose sons and daughters had emigrated since 1990. More importantly, they did not draw my attention through the parents I was working with but through the articles in the local press, where I first learned about a massive influx of remittances to Serbia. Almost all daily newspapers and weekly magazines featured articles and interviews with the Governor of the National Bank of Serbia, Radovan Jelašić, about the \$4-5 billion flowing into Serbia in the form of remittances.⁴ However, I must emphasize that, when put into perspective, the

4. <http://www.politika.co.rs/rubrike/Ekonomija/t30564.lt.html> [accessed 24/02/2011]; <http://www.politika.co.rs/rubrike/Ekonomija/t45185.lt.html> [accessed 24/02/2011]; <http://www.danas.co.rs/20070630/ekonomija1.html> [accessed 24/02/2011]; <http://www.danas.co.rs/20060206/ekonomija1.html> [accessed 24/02/2011]; <http://www.danas.co.rs/20050804/hronika1.html> [accessed 24/02/2011]; <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=379974> [accessed 24/02/2011]; <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=610557> [accessed 24/02/2011]; <http://www.nin.co.rs/pages/column.php?id=874&column=Ekonomija> [accessed 24/02/2011]; also see *NIN's* special issue on the Serbian diaspora published on 4 May 2006. <http://www.blic.co.rs/ekonomija.php?id=13325> [accessed 24/02/2011]; <http://www.blic.co.rs/blickomentar.php?id=1306> [accessed 24/02/2011].

Serbian case may not be as striking as it first appears. The Serbian economy crashed completely in the early 1990s and the Department for Balance of Payments of the National Bank of Serbia had very scant data on remittances during the 1990s, and Yugoslavia, of which Serbia was a part until 1991, was a country with a long tradition of labour migrants in the West who were regularly sending remittances. At the same time, I was spending hours and hours at the homes of elderly mothers in Belgrade who had children living abroad: neither did they mention remittances, nor did I witness the presence of additional income within those households. This huge discrepancy between what I was witnessing as a participant observer and what was being reiterated by the official discourse in Serbia put remittances into the focus of my study in Belgrade. Simply put, I did not witness remittances having any significant material influence on the households of the elderly parents I was visiting on a daily basis; quite the contrary, most of these people lived in tiny flats built in traditional socialist concrete apartment blocks in serious need of redecorating and refurbishing, and with household appliances on average 30 years old. What I did witness was the loneliness of the parents left behind, in most cases mothers, who talked for hours on end about their loss, their migrant children, and the emptiness, physical and emotional, that remained after their departure.

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF SERBIAN MIGRATION AND REMITTANCES

Remittances were a taboo among the Belgrade-based parents of emigrants. The very question of whether or not they received money⁵ from their emigrant sons and daughters abroad caused deep embarrassment among my respondents. They blushed, looked away and explained that they did not give birth to their child expecting him or her to finance them later in life. Even if they were

5. It is important to note here that none of my research participants (either in London or Belgrade) used the word 'remittances' ('doznake' in Serbian). Remittances in Serbia are referred to as 'money' ('novac' or 'pare' in Serbian). There is no semantic difference between the word 'money' in its other meanings (e.g. a current medium of exchange in the form of coins and banknotes; financial gain; wage; assets) and in the meaning of 'remittance'. The word 'remittance' in Serbia is used only officially, by banks and other institutions dealing with financial transactions. Thus to say that one is receiving remittances is, in Serbian, to say that one is receiving money, which implies either a professional or charitable relationship.

receiving remittances, parents insisted that they were not using that money to supplement their pensions. To Serbian mothers in Belgrade, many of whom were born before or during the Second World War, receiving material support from their children is unacceptable. These women share the traditional patriarchal values typical of Serbia in the first half of the 20th century: women are primarily mothers and self-sacrificing caregivers (Erich 1971; Blagojević 1996).

There was a clear distinction made between the money their son or daughter might send occasionally, and remittances like those the Yugoslav *'gastarbajteri'*⁶, on temporary work in Germany in the 1970s and 1980s, used to send to their families. Receiving financial support, or a gift the value of which is not purely symbolic, was considered by Belgrade-based elderly mothers as something that, in their words, only 'peasants' (i.e. the lower classes), would accept. The gift that parents deemed appropriate for a parent-child relationship was a gift with little or no material value, a gift that was symbolic and inalienable. Money thus becomes a type of circulating form of inalienable gift, which parents do not use for consumption but put aside and save so that their children eventually get it back as an inheritance. The only exception to this rule is money used for purposes that transcend consumption, such as treating a severe illness or paying for a funeral. A gift which comes from a 'sacred object' of parental care and love – a child – cannot be consumed in a mundane way.

This article places under scrutiny the consequences that remittances have on relationships between Belgrade mothers and their migrant children. One of the key factors in determining these consequences are transformations in the basic relationship between mothers and children and the way these are constituted and changed by material culture and relations of gifting.

6. The word *'gastarbajter'* was imported directly from the German *'Gastarbeiter'* and means 'guest worker'. Because of the large number of guest workers from Yugoslavia in German-speaking countries (Germany, Austria and Switzerland), the word *'gastarbajter'* has come to denote a guest worker from Yugoslavia (later on from Serbia) anywhere in the world. Thus nowadays people in Serbia speak of *'gastarbajteri'* in America, Canada, Australia, etc.

THE TABOO OF ACCEPTING MONEY

Just as parents knew exactly what was appropriate to receive from a migrant child and in what form it was appropriate to receive it, they were also quite explicit about the objects they themselves were sending. Sending practices, too, appear to have a pattern. If there are grandchildren, it is quite common to send them sweets and savoury snacks which mothers were in the habit of buying for their children. Apart from food, which is sent by most parents to their children and grandchildren, money is another common gift sent to children abroad. This way round, the gift giving was entirely acceptable, unlike the other way around. This practice seemed to be utterly paradoxical because in many cases it was the parents who were in real financial need and for whom sending €50 was an effort involving months of deprivation of basic items. It was just as common to come across such cases as it was to hear that they had not been on a holiday for 15 years, that they had a 30-year-old car they could afford to drive, that the last household appliance they bought was 20 years ago, that they had stopped eating meat and fish because they could not afford them, that their diet consisted of bread, milk, potatoes, beans and cabbage, and that they lived on credit because their pensions were not enough to cover even the basic monthly bills. And yet at least twice a year they would send €50, €100 or sometimes even €200 as a gift to their son, daughter, or grandchildren.

Such was the case of Ana, whose son immigrated to Australia with his family more than ten years ago. Ana has a minimum state pension because she earned her wages mending stockings; even though she is almost 80 and her eyesight has badly deteriorated, she still occasionally takes on some orders from her old customers to supplement her pension, which is not enough to cover her basic monthly bills. In addition to this, she had to rent out a bedroom and move to the lounge (she lives in a one-bedroom flat) in order to supplement her very low income. Despite having to struggle to meet the most basic existential needs, Ana still tries to send some money to her grandchildren in Australia:

Whenever I hear that someone I know is going to Australia, I send a letter and enclose 100 Marks [around €50] for the children to have for a chocolate from

Grandma. But to tell the truth, my daughter-in-law doesn't like me and she embarrasses me in front of the people who I ask to hand-deliver the money. Last time I sent them a letter like that, I wanted those people to go and see their house, to see how they live and then tell me about it when they come back from Australia because I've never seen my son's place, I don't know what their home looks like. My son travels a lot because of the nature of his work, so I can't blame him; but his wife is treating me really badly and I think I will stop sending anything. He knows that I am struggling to make ends meet with my pension, and every now and then he asks me if I need help. But I would never ask him for help; I would rather find my own ways of surviving than receive money from them. I was trying to get pregnant for thirteen years...for thirteen years I was waiting to have a baby. My son came as a gift from God. There is no way I could ever accept anything from him, because he is so special to me.

Ana's comment that she did not give birth to her son expecting him to be useful and to financially support her was not an exception in my fieldwork. On the contrary, the '*sacred child*' proved to be a dominant theme in mothers' discourses about their children's migration. During fieldwork in Belgrade, I came across several cases where mothers were receiving remittances from sons or daughters. However, not a single mother who received remittances was actually using the money for everyday consumption. The money coming from a '*sacred child*' could be used only for specific purposes and only after all other means had been exhausted.

Like Ana, Jovanka is an elderly widow (in her seventies) who lives alone in a block of flats in New Belgrade. She is very specific about the gifts or financial help she receives from her daughter in London. It was only during the period of hyperinflation and shortages in 1993 and 1994 that Jovanka received material support from her daughter, mostly in the form of food and hygiene and cleaning products that were unavailable on the Serbian market:

In those years there was no air traffic because of the sanctions, so she had to fly from London to Budapest and then take a coach to Belgrade, bringing us food, cleaning products and other basic things which we didn't have here, such as soaps, shampoos, toothpaste, deodorants, etc. And again, when her father got

cancer a year ago, she was paying for the treatment because we couldn't afford it... she also paid for his funeral. She adored her father; she knew exactly when he passed away. She came back home from work in London, sat down to have a coffee and a cigarette, looked at the icon on the wall and saw her father's image. She phoned me from London to say that she knew that dad had just passed away... She really had a special connection with him.

Svetlana, a widow in her seventies, with two sons in the United States, explains her experience with remittances:

The younger one has always been more generous; I remember him coming from Vienna during that horrible hyperinflation in 1993 loaded like Father Christmas with carrier bags stuffed with washing powder, shampoos, soaps, toothpastes, all those products we couldn't find here; I also remember him bringing us chocolates; I was eating more chocolate then than ever in my entire life... And even though the situation has got much better nowadays, he still sends the money. He doesn't send money only to me, but also to my sister, to my brother-in-law, to their daughter, and to his uncle as well; he really spends a lot. And I know that he doesn't earn a lot, he lives quite modestly. I don't spend that money but put it in the bank. I have two savings accounts that the two of them will inherit one day when I die. I don't want to spend their money unless something happens, such as an illness or an operation. I don't want to be a burden to them. I would prefer to sell one of my [late husband's] paintings if I needed the money.

NARRATIVES OF CLASS TRAJECTORIES

Even though the women in the examples above were not in the same financial situation, some were on the edge of survival and others were better off, what they had in common was an understanding that, if received, remittances should not be consumed for mundane purposes because they came from their children, who they considered sacred objects of love and care. This attitude towards children, I would argue, is typical of the generation of women born around the Second World War who belonged, in their own view, to the middle class in former Yugoslavia. In order to understand the meaning of remittances in the relationship between Belgrade mothers and their emigrant children, we

need to elucidate the meaning of ‘class’ in the context of post-communist Serbia and the underlying normative aspect of family relationships.

In a study of Bosnian refugees in the Netherlands and Australia, Jansen uses the term ‘middle [layers]’, borrowed from Yugoslav social scientists, to describe a large and heterogeneous socio-economic category that includes white-collar workers of various professions (Popović 1987, cited in Jansen 2008, 184). In this way, according to Jansen, one solves the problem of transposing the issue of class from real existing socialist to real existing capitalist contexts (Jansen 2008, 184). In yet another recent study, about Croatian immigrants in America and Australia, the class distinction between the two waves of immigrants makes up a central argument of the book (Colic-Peisker 2008). Contrary to Jansen, Colic-Peisker (2008, 18) takes up Weber’s concept of class using the terms ‘middle’ and ‘working’ class to distinguish between the ‘white’ and ‘blue’ collar workers respectively. I would argue that the term ‘middle’ or ‘middle layers’ (Jansen 2008) does not capture the complexity of the class issue in the (post-)communist context, as much as using Weber’s concept of class (Colic-Peisker 2008), without contextualizing it within the particular (post-)communist context, for it fails to account for differences between the concept of class in this and the capitalist contexts.

According to Weber (1998, 181), ‘we may speak of a ‘class’ when (1) a number of people have a specific causal component of their life chances in common, in so far as (2) this component is represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income, and (3) is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labour markets.’ This definition applies only partly to the concept of class in the (post-)communist context in which belonging to the middle class was defined not only by profession, as suggested by Colic-Peisker (2008), but was also determined by belonging to a particular cultural milieu, usually defined by proximity to urban centres. ‘Class’, I would suggest, in the (post-)communist and (post-)Yugoslav context, denotes not only one’s position within the socio-economic landscape, but also one’s place in the physical landscape. Thus, the term ‘middle class’ in the former Yugoslavia was used interchangeably with the term ‘urban class’; the two were linked together. It is important to note here that during the post-

Yugoslav years a new middle class emerged in Serbia, one that is more similar to Weber's definition and distinct from the 'old' middle class of the Yugoslav period. In this article we are discussing the 'old' middle class, defined more by its education, profession and proximity to an urban centre and its culture than by income; unlike the new, post-Yugoslav middle class in Serbia defined primarily by income and not by education or proximity to urban centres.

The case of the Serbian middle class brings to mind Jennifer Patico's study of consumption in the post-Soviet middle class where those who defined themselves as such did so on the basis of being born and socialized within middle-class families and the middle-class milieu of the Soviet period. This group appropriated its 'middle-class' identity in the post-Soviet times even though its members 'found it increasingly difficult to conceive of themselves that way given their positions in a new market in commodities and labor' (Patico 2008, 25). The old middle class in Serbia, like its Russian counterpart, has become impoverished, but people still define themselves as 'middle class' based on their 'culturedness' (Patico 2008, 26). Even though the former occupations of my respondents in Belgrade varied substantially in terms of income (a teacher, a seamstress, a company director, a translator, a housewife), they all had in common that they lived and raised their children in Belgrade socializing them into this 'old' middle-class identity and providing the education and skills that subsequently facilitated their children's emigration. The comparison with the Russian self-professed 'middle class', the diversity of backgrounds, with many 'urban' dwellers in Serbia coming from the countryside (for an excellent discussion on this see Jansen 2005), as well as very different occupations, ranging from blue to white-collar workers to the unemployed, points to the fact that the class discourse in Belgraders' context was highly subjective. In other words, appropriating the middle-class identity was the result of an active process of self-positioning and constructing one's 'culturedness' in opposition to the 'other', embodied as the 'peasant', often coming from the highlands or elsewhere outside Belgrade (see Spasić 2006).

As we have seen in the examples above, mothers, all of whom belonged to the 'old' middle class, were adamant about the fact they were not expecting material support from their sons or daughters. Whenever I implied that Serbia is one of the top remittance-receiving countries in Europe, they would become defensive

and say that that might have been the case in rural Serbia where peasants are not embarrassed to ask their children to send them money and where parents have a different attitude to children than in urban areas. Thus, it is known in Serbia that ‘gastarbajteri’ send money back to their families in rural Serbia; that they build houses which remain empty, waiting for those guest workers to retire and return to live in them. This, however, is seen as typical of the ‘peasant’ and ‘working’ classes from which the majority of ‘gastarbajteri’ originated. When it comes to the ‘old’ middle class and their children, the only way that they can accept the circulation of money is from parents to children. Everything else is seen as the loss of one’s identity as a mother, and one who failed to provide for her children, regardless of their age, financial status and proximity. This phenomenon of the self-sacrificing mother has become even more prominent in the Serbian post-communist context where women have become ‘invisible’ in the political sphere and where their role in public has been reduced to that of mother and carer. In a study on motherhood in post-communist Serbia, Blagojević (1996, 631) uses the term ‘self-sacrificing micro matriarchy’ to describe the phenomenon of prolonged parenting and escape to intimacy as the only sphere in which women in post-communist Serbia could exert some power through self-sacrifice and both extensive and intensive use of their human resources. I would argue that with their children escaping the country because of war and poverty in the post-communist period, these women have become the ‘lost matriarchs’.

DOWNWRADLY MOBILE PARENTS

Even though the case of the Serbian ‘old’ middle class parents may seem extreme compared to the majority of other examples in the literature on remittances, I would argue that this is actually a typical case of downward social mobility. One of the classic studies of downward mobility during the Great Depression in 1930s America, showed that families tried to hide material deterioration from others by cutting back on less visible costs and by struggling to keep up appearances, seemingly untouched by poverty (see Komarovsky 1940). Another more recent study analysed downwardly mobile American middle-class managers in the 1980s (see Newman 1988). Because they are expecting to get back to work any day, jobless parents refuse to sell their house and pay an extremely high price for

trying to preserve the false public image of their middle-class standard of living. As Newman poignantly argues, the downwardly mobile cling on to their previous occupations as these signify their position in society; the wallpaper had to peel off long before would they accept the fact that they no longer belonged to the middle class:

„Some cling to the old persona for years. When asked, they claim their previous occupations as engineers, vice presidents or marketing, or sales managers. [...] For the kids' sake, for the wife's sake, or simply for the sake of one's own sanity, it is hard to ditch yesterday's honoured identity in order to make room for today's poor substitute” (Newman 1988, 10-11).

One of the first things that downwardly mobile families cut back on in 1980s America was food. No one outside the individual household could know whether occupants were still eating steak or, instead, much cheaper junk food. This is reminiscent of many a mother in my Belgrade fieldwork who changed her diet, often becoming a forced vegetarian because she could no longer afford meat and fish. New recipes, usually containing only a few of the most basic ingredients, emerged daily in the 1990s as substitutes for more elaborate dishes. There were numerous versions of the so-called ‘*embargo kolač*’⁷ made of flour, sugar, oil and a bit of orange squash. What mattered was that a mother was able to send homemade jam or ‘ajvar’ (paprika spread) to her daughter or son abroad, even if that involved sacrificing her own diet.

THE SOCIAL MEANING OF REMITTANCES

Serbian mothers' narratives about emigrant sons and daughters are evocative of Viviana Zelizer's study of the making of the ‘priceless child’ in early 20th-century America (Zelizer 1994). Zelizer argues that a shift in constructing the ‘sacred child’ emerged as a consequence of the massive industrialization in America at the turn of the last century. Gradually, the child was transformed from a unit of labour, even priced as such (older children had more value than

7. ‘Embargo cake’ (trans. IB). The term refers to a type of cake made by skilful housewives from the very few basic ingredients available during the UN sanctions and hyperinflation of the early and mid-1990s Serbia.

younger ones), to a priceless child, an object of continuous parental sacrifice and unconditional love (Zelizer 1994). Igor Kopytoff (2004, 273) argues along similar lines that material affluence in most modern industrial societies has allowed Westerners to 'purge relations with kinsmen of much economic content and make them almost entirely 'social'. According to Kopytoff, parents in Western societies are in a position not to expect any material benefits from their children; this is not the case in poor peasant societies where arduous material conditions influence rather different relationships between parents and children (ibid.).

Industrialization in Serbia did not get fully underway until the mid-20th century, when Tito put Yugoslavia on the fast track to catch up with belated modernisation (Perović 2006). Before the Second World War, 90 per cent of the Serbian population were peasants, with families organized into collective households called 'zadruga' (Isić 2006). The child in a zadruga was considered primarily as a unit of labour. There are documented cases in Serbia of families bribing teachers to overlook the fact that their children did not attend school because they were needed to work and maintain the household (Isić 2006). Once social reforms and serious industrialization started in post-World War 2 Yugoslavia, the role of the child also began to change. The 'priceless child' became a token of modernity. To admit to having a child with the prospect of material benefit became a taboo in late 20th-century Serbia, just as it had become half a century before in the United States.

It is interesting to see how this transformation was translated in the case of immigrants from Serbia. Before the breakup of Yugoslavia and the massive migration prompted both by the conflict and by post-communist transformations, migration from Yugoslavia consisted mostly of 'gastarbajteri' in Germany. The majority of Yugoslav 'gastarbajteri' came from rural Serbia, and with their practice of sending remittances back home they affirmed the class distinction between the *useful* children of peasants and the working class and the *priceless* children (Zelizer 1994) of the urban middle class. Thus, to say that one was receiving remittances or other forms of financial support from a child who had emigrated since 1991 would imply a lack of one's modernity and question one's middle-class status.

During the last decade of the 20th century the 'old' middle class of the Yugoslav period almost died out because of the severe economic crisis. To be more precise, this 'old' middle class has not entirely disappeared, but it has stopped socially reproducing itself as a consequence of tremendous socio-economic transformations in post-Yugoslav and post-communist Serbia, giving way instead to the 'new' middle class that began to emerge in the mid-1990s. The 'old' Yugoslav-era middle class has in reality become so impoverished that it has become an empty signifier, clinging on to class values that have become devalued in the 'new' middle-class system in post-communist Serbia. For generations of 'old' middle-class Yugoslav mothers who are now in their late sixties and seventies, to repudiate the financial support of a son or daughter abroad, even though realistically they need this help, enables them to claim their middle-class status and to show their resistance to the inevitable social transformations in today's Serbia. Remittances thus become a class distinction of an 'old' communist middle class that withered away with the breakup of Yugoslavia.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH NON-MIGRANT CHILDREN

At this point, one may ask how the parental attitude towards migrant children is different from the parental attitude towards non-migrant sons and daughters. There were several cases in the Belgrade fieldwork in which one child was abroad while the other remained in Belgrade. Parents had the same attitude in the sense that they considered it was their duty to make sacrifices for their children, regardless of how old and impoverished they themselves had become. As the majority of young people in Serbia today cannot afford to rent or buy their own flats, it was common in my fieldwork to come across households where the remaining child and his or her family lived together in the same parental flat. Not only did parents provide their children and grandchildren with accommodation but they also cooked, cleaned and often looked after grandchildren. Vida has a daughter in the United States and a son who stayed in Belgrade. Since her son could not afford to move away and his mother could not help him financially, they split Vida's two-bedroom flat in half and added a separate entrance door. Neighbours in Vida's block of flats were surprised when they saw another door appear in the previously blank wall of the corridor

and they gossiped that Mrs. Vida's son was manipulating his mother and that what he had done was outrageous – depriving his mother of her own space so that he could solve his housing problem. However, Vida maintained that it was her wish to help her children as much as she could and that she could not bear to see her son struggle in a tiny rented flat while she was on her own in a two-bedroom flat. Vida is retired and, since she has no savings, the only thing she can leave to her son and daughter is her flat. “One day when I die, my daughter will inherit my half of the flat, so that she has her own place to stay when she visits from America”, remarked Vida.

It was not uncommon to see Belgrade parents sell their flats in order to solve their children's housing problems or facilitate their migration. Dragan and Jelica are both retired and live in a small flat in New Belgrade. For many years, Dragan was the director of one of the state-owned companies in former Yugoslavia, and the company he worked for gave him a large flat. When their daughter decided to emigrate to Canada, Dragan and Jelica sold their flat and bought two smaller ones – one for the two of them, and the other for their son. The remaining money they gave to their daughter so that she had something to live on until she found a job and settled down in Toronto. In the meantime, both their daughter in Toronto and their son in Belgrade have married and had children. Dragan and Jelica spend at least three months every year in Toronto, helping their daughter and looking after their grandchildren. The rest of the time they are in Belgrade, looking after their son's children.

Milutin and Ljiljana have an older son in Los Angeles and a daughter who stayed in Belgrade. Sonja, their daughter, is divorced with a child. While Sonja was still married, her mother Ljiljana used to go to her place every day to look after Sonja's son. After her divorce, Sonja moved back in with her parents because their flat is large and in the city centre; being a single mother, this made things easier because she had both parents to help her look after her son. Even though Milutin and Ljiljana are 80, they still go to the market for groceries, cook, clean and take their grandson to and from nursery; Ljiljana regularly accompanies her daughter and grandson on summer holidays. Milutin says that he spent all his savings on his son's emigration to America and that since he has almost nothing now to leave to his daughter, he helps her as much as he can by looking after her

and her son. Milutin does not hide his happiness that Sonja did not like the American way of life when she visited her brother and his family, and that instead she stayed in Belgrade. If Sonja had gone to America, he and Ljiljana would also have had to move there. For Ljiljana, home is where the children are, and Milutin is certain that if Sonja had chosen to move to the States like her brother, Ljiljana would have insisted on the two of them moving there as well. Therefore, even though both Milutin and Ljiljana are quite old and fragile, they try their best to accommodate their daughter and her son. They have no savings left with which to help them financially; all they have left to give to the child who remained in the country is themselves, and they give themselves unselfishly.

Rather like Milutin and Ljiljana, Olivera has one daughter in London and another in Belgrade. Her daughter in Belgrade is divorced and, just like Sonja, has moved back to her mother's home following her divorce. Olivera describes her relationship with her daughters:

She [the non-migrant daughter] married very young and didn't have time to study because of the baby. While married, my daughter lived in Montenegro because her husband was from there. After the divorce my daughter moved back to Serbia and since she could not afford to support herself and her daughter, they moved in with me and my mother, who I look after as well since she's too old to live by herself. At least my daughter can finally afford to study since I'm there to help with her daughter and with housework. It is not easy having four women of four different generations in one household but I must help both my mother and my daughter. I did the same for my other daughter in London when she had a baby. I am their mother, and it is my duty to help my children.

In short, the sacrifices that parents made for absent children were no different from those they performed for non-migrant children. The fact that they belonged to the ex-Yugoslav middle classes who had experienced severe downward mobility in the 1990s, and that their children abroad, even if they had low-paid jobs, were now likely to have a much higher standard of living than their parents, is what makes parental sacrifice towards migrant children seem totally irrational to anyone else but themselves. To them, however, it seems only right to do the same thing for the child who is present as for the one who is absent. It is *absence*

which makes sacrifice for a son or daughter abroad stand out. Sacrifice for the present child and for his or her family seems only logical because these children are often jobless,⁸ with no prospect of renting, let alone buying a flat for their own families, and often struggling to feed their own children. Thus parents consider it their duty to take care of them, even if they are in their thirties or forties. Everything they *cannot* do on an everyday basis for their absent children and their families accumulates into what represents the ultimate sacrifice for them – sending money to their children and grandchildren abroad instead of receiving it from them. When possible, parents/mothers would personally help their children by looking after their children and cooking and cleaning for them and their families, like Olivera and Dragan and Jelica.

Until the early 1990s, most families in Serbia were nuclear;⁹ with the disintegration of Yugoslavia and massive pauperization in Serbia in the early 1990s, households started to expand from nuclear to collective, to include several generations. Research shows that today almost half of all families in Serbia live in collective households (Tomanović 2004, 368). Parents in Serbia depend enormously on their own parents for financial support and housing, as well as for child care (Tomanović 2004, 368-369). Another reason grandparents often live with their children is because institutional forms of care for the elderly in Serbia are virtually non-existent. Serbia has one of the most aging populations in the world today (Panev 2002), yet there is space for only 9,000 people in retirement homes (Milić 2004a, 446). In the absence of institutional care, families assume the role of looking after aged parents and grandparents. Almost two thirds of households in Serbia have a live-in elderly member to be looked after (Milić 2004a, 462). The role of looking after both children and elderly members of a household is strictly reserved for women in Serbia today

8. The unemployment rate in Serbia in 2005-2006, at the time of my fieldwork, was at around 30 per cent.

9. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for “Genero” for pointing out to the complexity of distinction of nuclear vs. collective (‘zadruga’ type) households in pre-Second World War period and post-war period. This is not to say that the two types of households did not co-exist, or that ‘zadruga’ is a token of pre-modernity, but rather an attempt to show the change in dominant trends in household types and the relevant changes to family relationships that this extension in the 1990s had contributed to.

(Blagojević 1995; Milić 2004a; Tomanović 2004). This phenomenon of the ‘re-traditionalization’ of family relations in Serbia has a multitude of consequences, some of which are argued to be a greater dependency of grown-up children on their families and a reluctance to leave the parental home (Tomanović & Ignjatović 2004), and a strengthening of informal kinship ties and other support networks which undermine society’s capacity for innovation and progress (Milić 2004b, 342).

What the above examples from anthropological and sociological studies attest to is a strong normative aspect to kinship relations in Serbia. Even though post-Second World War industrialization in Yugoslavia helped create a modern society with equal treatment and opportunities in the public sphere, many of the traditional norms have successfully persisted and half a century later are still dominant in Serbia. Adult female children are expected to live with and look after their aged parents, at the same time looking after their own children, cooking for the collective household, cleaning, shopping and working. The unwritten norms in Serbian society prescribe that the elderly should be looked after and not left to themselves. The same norms see daughters rather than sons as the sole providers of care for the elderly. Similarly, if there are no daughters, then a daughter-in-law is expected to take on the responsibility of looking after the aged in-laws. This intergenerational dependency goes both ways: just as children are expected to look after their aged parents, parents are also expected to provide for their children, with housing and by looking after their grandchildren, helping them financially and providing them with emotional support (Milić 1991; Tomanović 2004).¹⁰ Having said that, I must once again emphasize that the massive pauperization in post-1990s Serbia has most severely affected the elderly population,¹¹ whose efforts to behave towards their children as they are expected to do – that is, to be providers for them while they are alive – seem entirely irrational and require sacrifices on their

10. In this respect Serbia is not an exception, as similar patterns are found elsewhere in Southern Europe (Wallace & Kovatcheva 1998, 147). However, in the last 20 years Serbia has gone through extreme social transformations and thus stands out from other Mediterranean societies which have not had such extreme recent development.

11. One third of elderly people in Serbia live below the poverty line (Milić 2004a).

behalf. When a migrant son or a daughter then goes against the norms of the parent-child relationship and sends money or other forms of substantial financial help, instead of being a recipient of help from their parents, this has a profound effect on this most basic kinship relationship as it forces parents to reciprocate. The biggest sacrifice that parents can make for their migrant children is to reciprocate with a gift they struggle most to get hold of, and that is money. It was suggested at the beginning of this article that money in the case of Belgrade parents and their migrant children becomes an inalienable gift, suggesting that if accepted it would 'pollute' (Douglas 2002) the relationship between parents and children. For money has no place in the sphere of intimacy and love such as in the case of a mother-child relationship (Simmel 1978, 376). The mother-child relationship is inherently asymmetrical, with mothers being the ultimate givers of the ultimate gift – the gift of life. According to Simmel (1964, 392), the return gift can never surpass the initial gift – 'the first gift is given in full spontaneity; it has a freedom without any duty, even without the duty of gratitude'. Receiving money as a gift from children pushes mothers not only to reciprocate for this gift, but to outweigh it and restore the debt inherent to a mother-child relationship.

CONCLUSION

As a result of the severe pauperization of the 'old' middle class in Serbia during the 1990s, the generations that had constituted the middle class in pre-1990s Yugoslavia found themselves 'debased' and struggling to hold on to old values in an attempt to restore a sense of normality into their lives during the chaos of the 1990s. For these people, as for millions of other Eastern Europeans, the changes that post-communism brought meant, as Katherine Verdery (1999, 35) described, "a reordering of people's entire meaningful worlds; [...] a rupture in their worlds of meaning, their sense of cosmic order". Even though the category 'middle class' from Yugoslav times was in the 1990s replaced by the categories of 'poor', 'poorer' and 'extremely rich' which instigated new values and societal norms, the old middle class still clung relentlessly to their old habits and beliefs, some of which manifested in their relationship with their children. We have seen in the case of remittances that money sent in this way is not always as beneficial as development agencies consider it to be. It can,

as in the case of Belgrade parents, have negative consequences when parents then try to compensate for this gift by making vicarious sacrifices for their children, further aggravating their own material condition. The social norms relevant to these generations of parents imply that mothers are there to protect children and look after them long into adulthood. They do not expect their children to sustain them or materially support them. This was considered something that 'peasants' would do, such as those who had 'gastarbajter' sons in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. The 'old' urban middle class was there to support its migrant children in every possible way, and not the other way round. Remittances thus become a highly contested gift which creates tension and humiliation and distorts the power relation between mothers and children, often with profound consequences for this most basic kinship relationship.¹²

I would argue, that in this migration process mothers left behind in Belgrade have probably suffered the biggest defeat because they lost in the only field in which they could exert some control and power, that is, their relationship with their children. Not only are these women old, impoverished and debased in the post-communist transitional turmoil, but they have also, in many cases, lost their only stable identity, that of a mother. They are still alive but, without a child there to partake in this mother-child relationship, these women are dead as mothers. The only way for women to acquire and exercise power came with age and with having children to provide and care for. And with their children permanently gone as migrants, these elderly women have been pushed out even from their only remaining leverage in society – that in the sphere of domesticity and family.

12. Having said this, it is important to bear in mind that this is the case with migration from *urban* places; comparative research with 'gastarbajteri' in Switzerland originating from *rural* parts of Serbia supports the apparently non-problematic relationship between money and blood ties in this other case. For comparison with rural Serbia, see Petree & Baruah (2006). A study of migrant-sending households in Serbia-Montenegro receiving remittances from Switzerland. Geneva: International Organization for Migration.

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Posledice primanja i slanja doznaka na odnose između majke i deteta u urbanoj Srbiji

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Sažetak: U članku se ispituju posledice koje slanje i primanje doznaka ostavljaju na srodničke odnose, posebno na odnos između majki i dece u kontekstu postkomunističkog i posleratnog srpskog društva (mislí se na ratove tokom devedesetih). Postavljanjem doznaka u specifičan istorijski i društveni kontekst, vidi se da su za pripadnike srednje klase iz perioda SFRJ one postale poklon koji remeti odnos između majki i dece, sa negativnim posledicama na majke koje su ostale u zemlji. Umesto finansijske pomoći i sigurnosti koje bi trebalo da pruže ostarelim majkama, doznake ih navode da čine ogromne žrtve kako bi se odužile i potvrdile svoj društveni status i identitet majke.

Ključne reči: rod, doznake, Srbija, maternistvo, odnos majke i deteta, društvena klasa