SOCIAL CHANGES AND CHANGING ROLE OF MIXED HOUSEHOLDS IN SERBIA

Drustvene promene i izmenjena uloga mešovitih domaćinstava u Srbiji


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ABSTRACT Every specific social order relies on certain elements in social structure. In the case of Serbian society in the last decade of twentieth century significant role had played group of people that occupied two socio-economic positions, workers’ and peasants’. The power of this group steamed from two points: their value system and capability to efficiently survive economic hardship by having alternative to secure living resources. Other specificity of this group is its dispersion, or non existence of consciousness of belonging to this specific group. However, social “glue” for this group was nationalism and xenophobia, and common cultural model of behaviour deeply rooted in rural culture. Ruling regime in Serbia, being itself based on nationalistic elements, had found its counterpart in this group. This paper deals with the position and changing role of the mentioned group from so called mixed households and the prospects of changes after the elections 2000 in Serbia.

KEYWORDS social structure, politics, economy, social changes, workers-peasants, transition
The first step of transition in former communist countries was to make political changes. “Free elections were needed to blow away the old regime” (Rose, Harper, 1998:13), in order to introduce the new political forces willing to change the whole social and economic system. Besides political and economic factors that influenced the specific way of transformation from a centralized command economy to a market economy, and from authoritarian to democratic society, social and cultural characteristics of the population of a country have very important role. There were different social groups as actors on the scene – some played passive, others played active roles. In Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (or we can say in Serbia, since the political power was concentrated in one centre in Belgrade) this political change did not take place. The rejuvenated communist elite won the first free elections in 1992 (after the breakdown of Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia), and the process of transition was in the hands of practically renamed old communistic party. The government actually showed an interest in maintaining control over the main resources in the state and in continuing with the command type of economy.

This intention is visible in privatisation process in Serbia. In the period from 1991 to 1997, law for privatisation in Serbia changed three times, and every time it had a negative effect on liberalization in the economic sphere. On the other side, the regime invested a lot in securing control over the police and the army as a coercive instrument. In these circumstances, without open character of economy and with strong police as a mean for oppression, a weak civil society in Yugoslavia, which was concentrated mainly in cities, was forced to struggle to preserve its own existence.

Nevertheless, democracy in Serbia had another obstacle beside the government – mixed households. These households, as an important segment of Serbian society are characterized by duality in an economic sense. They are very flexible in assuring the necessary resources to satisfy the basic living needs because their members have, beside their regular jobs, agriculture as an additional economic activity and additional income. Power and social influence of this social group is due to its size. “In 1990, 13.5% of the population of Serbia without the provinces was purely agricultural, 25.2% was mixed and 62.2% was non-agricultural” (Mrkšić, 1995:38). In later years, size of this group did not decrease. In fact it was increased since many people from the urban population in the situation of growing poverty were looking at their agrarian roots as a solution for improving bad threatened living conditions, and started to earn additional resources meliorating the land. However, these “migrants” to the other social group cannot be treated as true halfers because

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1 The data on which this work is based are mainly for FRY as a whole. But having in mind the size and economic power of the federal units, political circumstances in both of them, and methodology used in data collecting it is possible to focus only on Serbia in this paper.
they will look for any opportunity to escape from this position. For them it was forced situation and the lifestyle of those who migrated to halfers is different from this group.

In this paper, I will give some arguments why this social stratum was so important in the social and political life of Serbian society in the last decade, and how the regime in its strife to stay in power was relying on this stratum. There are three main aspects regarding the mixed households and their role that will be discussed here. First, the issue of the value system and characteristics of the stratum will be discussed; next, the position of mixed households on welfare ladder through time; and finally the position in the economy and the economic competition with other strata will be analysed. The relationship between the regime and the part of society named mixed households as very important will be shown. The second part of the text addresses the role of halfers during the transitional processes, and institutional and legal changes, and it shows somewhat paradox situation. Namely, how this group due to characteristics which promoted it during the old regime, can serve as suspensor of social protests during the hardship of transition. This problem also shows how some groups in society may become important actors in specific historical periods of political and social changes.

Values and Orientations of the Members of Mixed Households

The transformation of post communist societies needs social forces that will promote the new values and way of thinking. In addition, the influence of the actively opposed forces should be prevented or at least kept on the lowest possible level. It seems that in the climate of widespread changes and liberalization in Central and Eastern Europe the influence of progressive democratic forces in Serbia was absent, or at least was not sufficient to significantly affect social and political life of the country. On the other hand, members of mixed households seemed to oppose the democratic movement both in an active and passive way. This means that there was a discrepancy between the values and orientations of this social group and the values and orientations characteristic of a democratic society. The historical background of Serbian society is full of examples of non-democratic political culture (Ivanović, 2000). The first reliable survey among the pupils of high schools in 1973 (Kuzmanović, 1995:196) shows a very high level of authoritarianism. The survey from 1994 shows that authoritarianism in Serbia at that time was present in a great extent. The interesting point is that the most authoritarian groups were peasants (58.9% of them are authoritarian), followed by pensioners (51.8%), unskilled (50.5%) and skilled (44.5%) workers (Kuzmanović, 1995). Unfortunately, this survey does not include the data for mixed household members, but it is possible to extract valid conclusions from available data. Since the members of the mixed
households are substantially present in two job branches, peasants and workers, it is obvious that the members of these households adhere to the most authoritarian segment of the Serbian society. Two of the main characteristics of authoritarianism are collectivism and intolerance to differences. Any politics that is based on different values and with different orientations is not well accepted. In the Serbian case, where the main role in politics was played by the charismatic and authoritarian leader, any idea of civil society was condemned from this stratum. Additionally, media discourse was characterized with manipulation and aggressive nationalism, and the members of mixed households (as a part of the agrarian population) were manipulated themselves. Another way how this stratum had been involved in enforcing the authoritarianism was participation in mass-rallies organized by the regime, as opposed to the occasional rallies held by democratic forces. There are no exact data but it is certain that the significant part of participants of the regime-organized mass rallies (such as for example a counter rally in Belgrade in 1996) in the last few years were members of mixed households. Their mobilisation had been accomplished on ideological level, and as such on rather voluntary base. Furthermore, members of mixed households are the most passive in expressing the opposition to any policy that endangers the physical existence of population through the war, for example. As long as the authority has adequate explanation and rationalization of the problems that affects the society people from the mixed households would accept any adversity such as hunger, war etc. The role of national myths appeared to be very important constituent of social environment. “The time of worshipping of old symbols and values appeared, not as valuable heritage, but as sole true direction signs and rules for organizing present and projecting future” (Parodija Tragičnog, 2002:91). This almost paradox situation in Serbia was the issue of many discussions among opposition and NGOs on how to introduce changes and civic activism. What can be extracted from above mentioned is that this stratum was directly involved in the fight with the citizens and democratic movements. Usually, due to its size and economic position it was acting as a tool to tranquillise the society and discourage the anti-government movement. However, in some situations, such as the counter rally in Belgrade, this stratum was mobilized by the regime to play a more active role in protection of the order.

Position on the welfare ladder

Besides the orientation characteristic for mixed households, there are some other external factors that affect the perception of this social group. Perception of its own position on the welfare ladder, or simply perception of its own relative situation compared to other social groups is very important. Since there are no data about mixed households and the change of their relative position we should analyse the
two job groups in which mixed household members participate -- workers and peasants. In the situation of general pauperisation in Serbia, except the elite and small number of those connected with the elite, the intensity of the process had a different scope for different households. The most affected stratum has been non-agrarian population and their households. According to the compared data for FRY from 1992 and 1995, this stratum kept the highest intensity of the process of pauperisation with very negative structure. One quarter of these households were classified as poor, and 6,4% extremely poor, compared to 1,22% for mixed households and 0,93% for agrarian households (Grupa 17, 2000). Other surveys also indicate that the non-agrarian population experienced the biggest problems and decrease in standard, while the peasant stratum was the last on the list of experiencing negative changes. Since the mixed households obtain part of their income from agrarian activities, they could invest more effort in these activities in order to compensate for the loss on the other side. In addition, the size of the property plays certain role here, but any possibility to avoid the decrease of income from the non-agrarian sector was an important advantage. As a matter of fact, the situation of mixed households improved in the first half of ‘90s in relative terms. They did not experience a drop in living standards as the non-agrarian population did; therefore the crisis of society was not as significant as for the latter. Moreover, with an extreme decline in the living standard of certain strata, such as: clericals and professionals and clerical workers and technicians, mixed households members experienced a decrease in difference in material wealth in relation to the aforementioned strata. In the circumstances of widespread economic decline, mixed households found themselves in a somewhat better position on the ladder of wealth than before the crisis. This new attained position was something that had to be protected, and social status quo was very desirable for halves.

**Position in the economy**

People from mixed households rendered themselves more capable of overcoming the problems of destructed market and shortages in basic living goods than people from purely non-agrarian households. In the situation where salaries were not sufficient to cover the basic living needs, the position of double secured incomes provides much better base for competing in the non-agrarian job market. And even in the situation when salaries were delayed for several months the agrarian background gave the mixed households more flexibility to wait for better times and better payoffs. The problem would not be too large if the structure of Serbian economy was different. Many workers in big production plants, inherited from socialism, come from mixed households. They usually live in suburban areas, and after work in the plants go to ameliorate the land. During the recession period in the
last decade many of them also spent much time on paid and unpaid vacations and absences due to the lack of real job and also due to the policy that no one can be fired from its job while the FRY is under the sanctions. With this structure of workers it was impossible to organize the work of the syndicates and to organize the strikes. People from mixed households were more interested in using this time to work on the land and make up for the missing resources. On the other hand, the purely urban population without another source of income was not able to carry on the strikes on their own because there were always other workers present that “see the problems for our economy” and are ready to sacrifice for a better future. Because it was impossible to mobilise all the workers from plants it was hard to prove the legitimacy of the strikes. The urban population was practically forced to play by the rules of people from mixed households, and many did.

The other part of the story is the informal and illegal economy. “Together with uneven economic development, the legacy of former Yugoslavia imprinted yet another characteristic on the formal sector of the economy, often pointed to as a major determinant of grey economy. This is the structure of households referred to above [in the book], of which a considerable proportion (about a quarter) are mixed households considered to be constant suppliers of people eager to take part in irregular activities” (Mrkšić, 1995:39). The estimation is that the grey economy share in 1992 was 40% of the GNP of Yugoslavia (Mrkšić, 1995:39). Although all professional groups were involved in grey economy the largest share in artisan services belonged to skilled workers and peasants, while in the trade belonged to peasants and unemployed (Mrkšić, 1995). These data at first glance does not reveal much, but if we see the data about savings in early ‘90s the picture becomes clearer. Mixed households with an average income contrived 8,6% net savings in 1992 from the whole income. Non-agricultural (city’s) households with average income in 1992 had not been able to realize savings (Grupa 17, 2000). The analysis shows that mixed households and their members appeared to be the most successful under the circumstance of hard economic depression and crisis. Finally, from the point of success this social group represented somewhat socially influential and partially leading force in Serbian society, at least in the first half of the ‘90s.

**Social and political role**

It could be said that among many actors present in the social scene in Serbia after the breakdown of SFRY there was one stratum that the regime could rely on – the stratum of mixed households. The reason for this is due to the fact that the regime found its own counterpart in this stratum. The regime was communist even though the political system was multiparty, and the society remained centralized and even underwent more centralization during the time. It may appear that the civil
movement in Serbia was not to active in these years, since it was unsuccessful to gain the power to influence the political life in the country. That was not the case, but some of the characteristics of civil society resulted in their weak position in Serbia.

The civil and democratic movement in Serbia has, to some extent, unusual characteristics, and it appears to be nationally coloured. In March 1991, mass demonstrations were held in Belgrade, which were hindered in blood, with army tanks on the streets. The target of these demonstrations was Milošević and his regime, and aims for which protestors were fighting were liberalization and democratisation in the political and social spheres. Only one year after, the same regime managed to mobilize the strong support for the war in Bosnia and Croatia. In 1996 and the beginning of 1997, people were again protesting but this time because of the election fraud. The protests were partly successful because no one was taken to court for tampering with the results. The important thing is that most of the cities in Serbia passed under the opposition governance, and real institutional base for democracy appeared. These protests encompassed some nationalist, but also truly democratic and civic social groups. An interesting situation happened in 1999 during the NATO campaign on Kosovo when one could see similar mass rallies as those in 1996-97. This time the protests were held against the bombing, but also as a support for the regime – and indeed, the activist of the ruling parties organized these protests. These examples show that the regime was opposed by its citizens, which was publicly articulated from time to time. This opposition was the base for developing civil society in the same way as it was in the rest successful post communist countries. Therefore, the undemocratic regime had to find someone to fight against the civil society, beside the oppressive laws, police and devastating turnover in the economy.

Purely agrarian households were one part of the society where the regime had expected and actually had positive feedback. “[The] Rural population is inert by definition because it has secured food, relatively low life expenses and undeveloped cultural and other needs” (Pešić, 1998). However, for this analysis their role is not so important since their connection with the purely urban population was not extensive. The common “ground” where purely urban and purely rural situation were in touch was open food market. The population from mixed households was a perfect alliance because they shared at least the same working place with the urban population, and at the same time, retained its rural characteristics. Together with ability to successfully cope with economic shocks, the authoritarian character of the members of mixed households, plus the fact of improved social status, reveals the reason for the “natural” link with the authoritarian elite. The fact that the above-mentioned social groups were the main pillars of legitimacy of the regime was most obvious during the preelection campaigns. The content of video clips, speeches, iconography of the SPS (Socialist Party of Serbia) targeted mainly the rural
population. The most used elements were folk music, scenes of the countryside with ameliorated land, and nature was pictured in fresh and fruitful colours. Especially important part in campaign had fruits and crops present in majority of the visual materials produced by the regime. This emphasizing of agrarian motifs and lifestyle aimed to show the importance of peasantry for the state and Serbian society as a whole. Simple and primitive language and stress on abilities of “our” people to find its bearings in the hardest circumstances could only flattered to the members of agrarian and especially mixed households. The latter were in a position to see that they are the most capable among the urban population since the non-agrarian stratum suffered the most. And that is probably the reason why the regime managed to obtain very active support from this group relatively often.

Changes and mixed households

Finally, it is time to address some aspects of political and economic changes in Serbia in relation to mixed households. However, first we have to distinguish few things. Mixed household is a collective and it does not mean that every member of such household is engaged in both types of activities. On the other side, Serbian economy created a member of such household who was engaged in both industry and peasantry. With small incentives through salaries (this situation originates from the former Yugoslavia), and with strong peasants’ roots these workers started to treat the job in industry as a place which provide them with social and health care, and secure them pensions, without work. Protective politics for employed made almost impossible for one to loose the job. Second important notion is distinction of aspects of transition through which we will explore the changes that affect mixed households. Through political and economic aspects and their main characteristics I will also tackle cultural aspect related to mixed households and their members.

Changes in political practice and institution in Serbia are aimed to create open civil society with correspondent ideology. This ideology is characterised by different value ladder than socialist and nationalist ones, and subsequently by different dominant values, attitudes and behavioural patterns. Nevertheless, the changes do not come fast and many elements from the past continue to live longer than expected. In this sense politicians have very responsible role to help changes by promoting new values through public appearance. The tendency to rely on the old communicative patterns and ideological constructs is from time to time evident in public discourse of pro-democratic politicians. This behaviour has, of course, practical political value and purpose of gaining and maintaining political rating, but is also obstacle to changes. Even if it is present on small scale it gives in cultural sense solid ground for maintaining the old authoritarian models and maintain them play active role in everyday life, even in new circumstances. On the other side,
formal democratic political institutions and their implementation have constrainable effect on this authoritarian culture, and move this culture from public to private sphere. Nevertheless, the strength and influence of this culture will be visible for long time, and it will be connected to daily issues on Serbian political stage.

Economic liberalization and implementation of market economy will much more clarify the situation with mixed households than political changes. One of the urgent problems is related to employment, more precise available jobs, but also to the structure of potential employees in terms of skills and work ethics. Scarcity of jobs originates even from previous period due to specific nature of socialist economy with big, but inefficient enterprises, and in the last decade of the XX century the situation with jobs got even worse. One of the reasons for such big problem is the policy of the previous regime to keep people officially employed, though workers did not receive salaries for months, just in order to prevent social unrests. These big, state owned enterprises were playing the role of some institution for social care, and unofficially there were more people actually unemployed than official statistics showed. However, this situation with fictive jobs should be resolved if serious reforms take place. Rationalization in economy comprises much better human resource management, and utilisation of knowledge and skills, as well as careful management with work places. This means that requirements to employee should be skilfulness and work ethics which enables him to successfully meet demands of a job, and not simple need for a job.

Economic liberalization brings also cultural marginalization of some groups as they are not important players in social or political terms anymore. The best proof of this is that workers-peasants are not present in the public discourse lately. This group seems to be dissolved in the recent social processes, but we should not undermine the invisible effects of long lasting situation. Namely, the cultural models and patterns pertained to this group are still present in society and their eradication will take long time, and definitely without hundred percent success.

Here, I would like to stress one, at first glance paradoxical moment. Although these households and their members were one of the pillars of Milošević’s regime, they will also play important role in hard times during the transformation in Serbian economy. Some of the characteristics that enabled them to be very adaptable to new situations and hardship will have the same effect in transitional processes. I have in mind primarily capability to secure resources for living outside of industry and official economy, on their ground. They have already developed mechanisms to survive and in these new circumstances these mechanisms are still working. Restructuring of economy and changes in employment sector in Serbia nowadays is one of the hottest issues and many workers will supposedly remain without jobs. Many of them are from mixed households and accustomed to similar situations, though this time the consequences are much straightforward than in previous times.
However, they will remain passive even in this new situation, though their relative social position decline. The reasons for this are threefold: lack of culture of syndicalism, knowledge in social dialog and fight for workers rights; disorganization that comes from the fact that they are not really homogeneous social group, but dispersed and present in many social groups and strata. There is not conscious of belonging to the group of people from mixed households, but rather belonging to some other social groups such as professional or geographical; finally as it was mentioned, they are capable to wait for a job longer than people which do not belong to this group, without being existentially endangered. Therefore, reformers here should not expect big social unrests, at least not from the side of the old allies of the previous regime. The most probable outcome is that this social group will dissolve among the other structured social groups, as the importance of rural background decrease. This does not mean that the mixed households will disappear. It means simply that the attribute “mixed” will be less significant and the rural part will become invisible as professional stratification starts to work providing the main income for the family.

This brings us to the next problem related to this group. With the development of market economy and democracy in Serbia, the link between education, profession and level of income will start to play a role again, and the losers, in relative terms according to the position on social ladder, will be mixed households and their members. In new circumstances their qualities will not be the most desirable. Being unorganized and socially invisible is not beneficial in the situation of transition. There is present danger that policy and decision makers will simply forget at this social group in their reform plans. Special urge for this is lying in the fact of the estimated size of this group and potential problems that it can cause in long terms. Successful economic reforms include rising of competitiveness of the population in terms of human resources and skills and knowledge. Urgency in almost every segment of Serbian economy can hide the fact of the size and importance of dealing with the problems of mixed households and people that belong to them. Having in mind low educational level and low human capital quality it is obvious that one big campaign must be aimed at solving the problems related to this specific group. Lack of action now may cause economic and political problems in the future that can hinder changes. Some parallel can be drawn with Polish example with farmers, which make up to 25% of the country’s population, which shows that this problem is not minor one. Polish farmers, with inherited land structure with too small pieces of land for serious and competitive farming, found themselves in unsatisfactory position in relation to the farmers from the EU. Without serious programs and reforms being implemented during the first decade of transition, Polish farmers are somewhat late and unprepared for the process of EU accession, and market economy. The result is social tensions and protests of farmers that put pressure on political decisions and pace of changes. It is true that Serbian case is different in a
sense that people from mixed households are not organized as Polish farmers are, but it can happen that specific social circumstances initiate the process of homogenization of this group and creation of group self-consciousness. This can happen if the group remain out of any social and economic flows and without changes to access to some of the processes of changes through some other groups. The result can be social tensions and unrests. Therefore, policy and decision makers must acknowledge the fact of a large number of mixed households and to include this in the programs of economic education and plans for economic development of specific regions.
References


