

## BETWEEN THE NATIONAL PAST AND (AN) EUROPEAN FUTURE

### Između nacionalne prošlosti i evropske budućnosti

*APSTRAKT* Tekst se bavi stepenom otvorenosti domaćih političkih institucija ka evropskim inicijativama i pokušava da markira elemente saradnje i napetosti u komunikaciji između evropskih institucija i domaćih aktera koji rade na implementaciji evropskih inicijativa. Pri tom, fokusirane su kulturne i kulturom uslovljene prepreke koje utiču na (ne)razumevanje između domaćih i stranih, pre svega, evropskih institucija. Prezentacija intervjua vođenih sa trideset i dvoje predstavnika srpske političke elite sledi bitne kulturne dimenzije, kao što su komunikacija, vrednosti, stil života i elementi materijalne kulture, i utvrđuje čitav niz kulturnih neusklađenosti i razlika. Osnovni zaključak teksta je da ove razlike ipak nisu nepremostive.

KLJUČNE REČI *kultura, razlike, vrednosti, Evropa, Srbija*

*ABSTRACT* The paper deals with the the degree of openness of the local political institutions towards European initiatives and mark the elements of cooperation and tensions in communication between European institutions and local actors engaged in the implementation of European initiatives. The focus is on the cultural or culture-determined obstacles bearing upon the (lack of) understanding between the local and foreign, primarily European institutions. The paper presents data obtained though in depth interviews with political elite members. The analysis follows several cultural dimensions such as: communication, values, life style, material culture, and emphasises existing differences on each of them. Nevertheless, the basic conclusion contends that these differences, although not negligible, are not insurmountable.

KEY WORDS *culture, differences, values, Europe, Serbia*

### Introduction

Throughout the history, political organization of the Serbs has revealed some elements indicating an ambivalent relation of the Serbian political and spiritual elite

towards the “West”, or rather towards Europe.<sup>1</sup> Although the dominant course of the Serbian political and spiritual elite has been one of resistance to Europe, the activities of part of the political and intellectual elite – true, marginal in terms of its political leverage – testify to the European spirit which has for centuries smouldered in the Serbian people. Various events, of different power and duration, conditioned primarily by the geopolitical position and economic history of Serbia influenced the forming of cultural and value patterns of the Serbian people. The period of building socialism introduced new elements<sup>2</sup> along with additional confusion in the already existing galimatias of values and cultures, counterposed to the increasingly pronounced unifying trend in European culture.

With the Treaty of Maastricht of 1992 Europe entered the third millennium, precisely at a time when the states of the former Yugoslavia, Serbia included, renouncing socialism, turned towards a 19th century re-examination and struggle for the attainment of national-romantic objectives and programmes. At no point in their history had the inhabitants of Serbia been so strongly exposed to the influences of different cultural, ideological, religious and value currents as they were in the past

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<sup>1</sup> Through the history there were several examples of this ambivalence. In the medieval time, wishing to become a king and Serbia (encompassing Raška and Zeta) a kingdom, Stefan Nemanja converted into Catholicism in 1217 and was proclaimed king by a papal decree of Honorius III. Only two years later, his brother Rastko (Sava) in Constantinople obtained the recognition of the Patriarchy of Peć as an independent Serbian Orthodox Church and became the first Serbian archbishop. Upon Sava's return to Serbia, Stefan reverted to Orthodoxy, which has from that time on prevailed among the Serbs. A few centuries later, another important Serbian ruler – Despot Stefan Lazarević, attempting to preserve what little Serbian medieval state had left from the thrust of the Turks at the beginning of the 15th century also converted to Catholicism.

Desiring to preserve their identity and the identity of the Serbian nation a part of which lived in Austria, the church dignitaries of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (1789) resisted the enlightened (purposeful) measures of Joseph II to open folk schools in their language, fearing Latin influence. On the other hand, despite the protests of church dignitaries, the first champion of enlightenment in Serbia Dositej Obradović, in the second half of the 18th century (1764) established a High School in Belgrade. In the first half of the 19th century (1835) Serbia, emulating the example of France adopted one of the most liberal European constitutions of that time. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (1886) afraid of permitting a more substantial Austrian economic and political influence on the only just renewed Serbian state, the Serbian Parliament for a long time obstructed the adoption of the law for the construction of a railroad connecting the West (Austria) with the East (Turkey) through Serbia. At the same time, the future Serbian king of the Karadjordjević dynasty translated J.S. Mill's essay “On Liberty”. Also, at the very beginning of the 20th century, Belgrade was the third city in the world to have an electrified streetcar.

During socialist period, although constantly under the influence of the USSR, Serbia, within the composition of Yugoslavia, lived through the second half of the 20th century open to the cultural influence of the West more than any other socialist country. Nevertheless, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1999) Milošević drew Serbia into a war with NATO.

<sup>2</sup> This, in the first place, relates to socialist values and those disseminated owing to socialism, such as collectivism, egalitarianism, classical feminism, cosmopolitanism, ethics of work.

decade. That is a period long enough for one or two generations to form and reshape their understanding of life and the world.

How did the centuries condensed in a single decade influence the political elite in Serbia and its way of thinking and acting? The following text shall attempt to provide an answer to this question. The reference framework shall be precisely the West, i.e. Europe that generations of politicians have, for centuries, looked at generally as a threat and at present as a declaratively proclaimed desirable destination of historical navigation.

### **Methodological remarks**

The research aim was primarily to establish the degree of openness of the local political institutions towards European initiatives and mark the elements of cooperation and tensions in communication between European institutions and local actors engaged in the implementation of European initiatives. Our focus was on the cultural or culture-determined obstacles bearing upon the (lack of) understanding between the local and foreign, primarily European institutions. We embarked upon this research without firm hypotheses on cultural differences thus leaving the respondents themselves to recognize and pinpoint their roots. The respondents were politicians, i.e. employees and officials of certain ministries and parliament members who hold high offices in parliamentary committees

The survey, or collection of the data, was carried out in the period from mid-February until the end of June 2003. In view of the fact that this is also the time of assassination of the Serbian prime minister, followed by the state of emergency, it is difficult to establish just to what degree it did influence the change of views of our respondents on issues we spoke about. Nevertheless, this fact did not directly affect the process of data collection.

Bearing in mind the qualitative research method applied (in depth interviews), we have left our respondents to speak about the things they considered essential, within the framework of the given questions (the guidelines for interviews) as to make interviews as spontaneous as possible.

Considering the sample characteristic our plan was to select three respondents in each of the planned areas (environmental protection, social issues, labour, agriculture and external economic relations): two respondents in the competent ministry, one of whom would be of higher (official) and the other of lower rank (employee), and one respondent in the relevant parliamentary committee. The realized structure of the sample departs from the planned due to the difficulties we had in reaching respondents which resulted in the under-representation of members of parliamentary boards and respondents in the spheres of labour and agriculture as

well as in the overrepresentation of respondents concerned with environmental protection. All in all, the attained structure of the sample was as follows:

	Ministry	Parliamentary Committee	Total
Environmental protection	4	1	5
Social issues	3		3
Labour	2		2
External economic relations	3	1	4
Agriculture	1		1
Total	13	2	15

The group of respondents, as a kind of a control sub-sample, also includes two foreigners employed with the ministries of labour and external economic relations in an advisory capacity.

The attained sample included seven women and nine men, revealing sample's overrepresentation of women in view of their actual share in political life. Considering the age, the total of eight respondents in the attained sample were under 35 years of age.

### **General remarks**

The general impression is that respondents openly support the idea of rapprochement to Europe and incorporation of the Serbian society into European integration courses. In a number of cases the respondents contend they have mission in achieving Serbia's full integration into the European Union, particularly those who hold primarily political offices. Devotion to the European idea is practically omnipresent and may be considered a framework for interpretation of the survey results obtained. The second general and very important remark has to do with the fact that the process of Serbia's integration into European flows has failed to gain substantial momentum, in the sense of developing a large number of specific meaningful activities aimed at harmonizing the domestic legal norms and practices with those of Europe.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the bulk of our respondents' experience concerns contacts with different institutions and individuals present here in the form of advisory bodies, agencies, non-governmental and governmental organizations implementing projects aimed at basic preparations and adjustment of local

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the Union of SCG was admitted to the Council of Europe in the course of our survey.

institutions for active involvement in direct cooperation with those of Europe. That appears to be the reason why the answers of our respondents not infrequently refer to an unsatisfactory level of cooperation. The third essential and general characteristic relates to an outstanding openness of our respondents towards foreigners, which is why even the slightest degree of xenophobia could not be noted. Conviction that cooperation with foreigners, and their presence in the country, may only be beneficial is commonplace.<sup>4</sup>

It might be beneficial to repeat that our respondents' communication with EU institutions (Brussels) is not the dominant part of their contacts with foreigners. Due to Serbia's recent admission to the CoE the larger number of governmental and non-governmental organizations operating in Serbia are from overseas countries, especially the USA, than from Europe.

In conclusion, we must underline that we found it most difficult to single out the elements of "shock" our respondents experienced in their communication with foreigners due to cultural differences, although this was our basic task. Much more surprising were organizational-institutional elements revealing different understanding of the place and role of certain local and foreign actors in their joint activities.

### Survey findings

This survey does not address all elements of culture where differences may be perceived, but only those where such differences are actually recognizable. For the purposes of this survey culture includes the following segments: style of everyday life; material culture reflected in the attained level of technological development and conditions in which a specific activity is performed; communications; and elements of a value framework, especially those pertaining to professional engagement.

#### Style of everyday life

*"I am a Balkan man"*, our respondent A was told by the head of a French mission, over a glass of vodka one evening, while he sat in the company of his host. There is no doubt that relaxed atmosphere, frankness and personal rapport make one's leisure more pleasant and the relations among people more friendly and open. But, does this also apply to working hours when most meetings of local and foreign

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<sup>4</sup> At this point we should perhaps note that a fair number of interviews was held on the eve of the Thessaloniki Conference, meaning that the need for European integration and expectation from the EU were discussed in public more than usual. We thus cannot say whether this pro-European climate influenced the views of our respondents and if so to what degree.

officials and employees take place? The question is important, since the local mentality does not allow for a large distance between the public (official) and private sphere.<sup>5</sup>

All our respondents have frequent, and some even everyday contacts with foreigners. These are mostly professional gatherings, i.e. seminars and workshops, and contacts with persons staying here within the framework of various projects. The prevailing impression of all respondents refers to exceptional mutual openness between local and European experts. K's experience acquired at an international meeting illustrates this: *"... There I had an opportunity to communicate with people from the European Union, the United States and other developed countries and to note the treatment we have at this point of time compared with the previous period in our country, and I (may) say that I was pleasantly surprised. Thus, that we are, in the first place, very much recognized in the world and that all our inquiries meet with a strong response and great understanding for the problems we point out, as well as remarkable readiness of people to help us in a way."*

The experience of respondent BA testifies to the same: *"They are always very, very well-intentioned and want to help us, which is really good. Not only now, but also at the time of... even at the time of the bombing."*

Another shared view of our respondents concerns the positive impressions foreigners took with them from Serbia. That is, on the one hand, assigned to the kindness of our people in general, and on the other, to the pleasant surprise of the foreigners that, despite the period of isolation, the local experts remained in contact with their profession and possessed topical and relevant professional information. BA notes: *"They always told me that they were very much surprised by how nice our people were in the streets, in the hotel and so on. – And the thing which -- from the professional point of view I always -- found – very gratifying, is the following – that, owing to the Internet, we were professionally absolutely – close by and could follow them."* As for the qualifications of our experts BA quotes the example of an experts' workshop organized by the European Economic Commission: *"... In November 2001, they – organized the first workshop and after 12 year came here, with really the most prominent personalities. – And in that organization of the workshop – dealing with international agreements in the sphere of environmental protection, we – had local speakers, who absolutely adequately responded. -- After that, their top ranks also came, directors of these -- segments, -- divisions, and they evaluated us. –*

<sup>5</sup> Despite the popular saying that "service is one thing and companionship another", those who strictly adhere to this principle are not received too kindly. In relatively small environments where a minority holds public offices, strict separation of one's public from his private role may endanger the popularity and thereby in time also the public office of the person concerned. Although Belgrade is considered a metropolis today, only 20% of its population has parents born in Belgrade. This may largely account for the prevailing spirit of community in the sense Toennies uses it, characteristic of small premodern environments.

*For instance, we obtained very high evaluations. – But it was only owing to the Internet. -- Because the Internet was a medium for communication, professional, a means which enabled us, lagging behind because of the sanctions, to follow -- topical -- professional developments and what is going on, what is being done in the trade”.*

On the other hand, the unpleasant impression our people could leave in personal contacts with foreigners is related to collective visits to foreign institutions where, primarily the lack of experience in proper behaviour in public, could create an impression of incivility: “... *Now I am talking about our people who go there for the first time. – And you can see at once that they do not know how to behave. It bothers me a lot -- professionally. One must at all times be moderate, always know – the principles of behaviour when you’re there, and one learns that. . And ... I am sad to see my young colleagues who always have that problem, and then... I feel ashamed a bit ... Thus, it is a professional -- image ... I think that in this respect we leave a picture which is fairly... -- you know.*”<sup>6</sup>

The above-mentioned experience of BA reveals that general references to mutual openness are not entirely unblemished. This is revealed in a number of prejudices and disparagement foreigners manifest for the people from Serbia, but cases of this kind are most often considered to be individual incidents as indicated by the experience of respondent K: “... *They communicated between themselves, and spoke French ... simply, they thought we did not understand ... we had a few people in our group who spoke very good French and so we -- came to understand that -- that it was somehow contemptuous.*”

Another life style difference is found in the communication of our people laying in the fact that Belgrade, as the single town with the population of a couple of millions in Serbia, became a metropolis only in 1960s. It is therefore small wonder that personal relations, with all their merits and faults, are strongly emphasized through the communication. Respondent A refers to the fact “*that our people are frank, they try to subsume everything under personal contacts, personal connections, they are emotional and thus transfer every professional conflict into the personal sphere*”. On the other hand, A believes that foreigners are more inclined to “*separate business from friendship*”. That is especially felt in initial contacts when foreigners manifest pronounced restraint and keep their distance, which our respondent calls “*taught cordiality and directness*”. A, however, says that “*our*

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<sup>6</sup> It is interesting that our respondent with 33 years of experience at work points at the young, inexperienced people as a problem. On the other hand, as we shall subsequently see, our younger respondents see an important problem of presentations by the local political elite before the foreign institutions, in the fact that the older members often do not speak foreign languages. However, this conflict of generations was highlighted only in this context and does not appear as a source of problems anywhere else.

*direct, frank and relaxed manner, transferred into the business sphere*” has a fast relaxing effect on foreigners who come to Belgrade. But this kind of approach produces an occasional shocking effect on foreigners. JP recalls that a foreign consultant was utterly perplexed when his colleagues from the ministry dispatched him to buy pastries to celebrate his birthday properly.

But, despite such shocks, not one of our respondents noted that personal contacts were an obstacle to cooperation, on the contrary. They had an impression that foreign representatives were pleasantly surprised “*seeing that this is the capital of a European country,*” says A explaining that before they came here “*Serbia amounted to something like Afghanistan or Moldova on their map*”. Respondent S recounted an anecdote from a meeting he attended abroad when the people he spoke to were surprised to hear where he had come from. “*They thought I was French, and when I said I came from Serbia they were very much surprised. I had the impression they expected to see a bearded face with bloodshot eyes.*” Other prejudices are, according to our respondent, linked with the socialist past we share with other Eastern European countries. “*It makes the Europeans look upon us as 'poor relatives',*” S says.

In spite of perceived prejudices, our respondents think that success in communication and completion of a job are primarily dependent on personal equations of individuals involved in specific business activities. Furthermore, the impression is that the relation of foreigners towards our experts has not been substantially influenced by the years of isolation and vilification of Serbia.

#### Material culture

Meetings between foreigners and representatives of local government take place in a specific real or virtual space. This implies appropriate conditions such as adequate space, i.e. logistics.

Indeed, a guest who is for one reason or another forced to wait for his host in a ministry or parliament building is hardly likely to find an appropriate reception or another room where he could make himself comfortable, take a refreshment or go to a washroom. The situation is no different with conference rooms, so that the talks often take place in inadequate conditions which interfere with normal communication and make it more difficult. This is not only the problem for the guests but also for the employees who, not infrequently, work in cramped space, which has not been refurnished for a few decades. This reflects on their performance and foreigners cannot understand so banal a problem. Our respondent JP says: “*At the beginning he found it hard to grasp, but now he has already accepted the fact that we cannot implement our plan on capacity building because we do not have the offices required. He was at a loss to understand that in a city with a population of a*



*million, a building cannot be found for the ministry to move in and expand in line with the increasing capacities, human and, in general, slowly also equipment and other things, because we simply have no place for the staff. .... One of the three main pillars of our work is the change of the ministry's structure, which we cannot realize for the lack of space."*

It is interesting that part of our respondents accept such conditions, paying no attention to them, while others are aware of their existence and feel ill at ease in this situation. Only S.M. sees it as an obstacle to do his work: *"Everything we have here, the architecture of the parliament and the staff, is incompatible with the policy it should produce... so that the parliament's resources are completely paralysed"*.

The problem is, however, much more general and concerns not only financial limitations but also an egalitarian understanding and the deep-rooted popular belief equating poverty with honesty – so important for public offices. Therefore, we in Serbia may often hear public disqualifications of those officials who *"rushed to refurbish their offices while people (or employees) go hungry"*.

Similar observations have been made with respect to logistics. BA proudly says: *"From the professional point of view I have always -- found it – very gratifying... – that, owing to the Internet, we were professionally absolutely –close by and could follow them."* But, she also notes that access to the Internet at work has until recently been limited to a relatively narrow circle of high-ranking officials and employees. In the information era it is completely inappropriate that any office job is done without a PC. In this respect the republic administration has made a substantial progress over the past two years, partly owing to the projects of international organizations for the acquisition and networking of PCs, and training of officials and employees to use them.

It is a younger staff who considers successful performance at work, and in cooperation with foreigners, inseparable from the use of modern technical facilities. They see an obstacle for cooperation based on advanced technology in the resistance of their older colleagues to innovations implying the use of state-of-the-art equipment. LL says: *"What I think is a problem, not for our ministry only, but generally for the government and administration, is that we do not have the administrative capacity - and I say that with great conviction - to carry this integration through. Quite simply we do not have the staff, and the most important project in my view is the empowerment of administrative capacities."* The fact is that in the ministries and the Serbian Parliament numerous PCs are no more than decoration, due to the culture with a deep-rooted traditional concern for older workers, which makes their resistance to change efficient.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand,

<sup>7</sup> At this point we could note that the popular consciousness traditionally ties old age to wisdom. It so happens that in public political showdowns in Serbia, political opponents are reproached for their youth, as a handicap in performing certain important public offices.

resistance to modern technology is partly linked with the language barrier to be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

## Communication

### *Oral communication*

One of the most important cultural preconditions for unobstructed contacts between the local population, i.e. their political representatives and foreigners is doubtlessly the language. The respondents we interviewed had no problem in this respect. All of them spoke at least one foreign language, predominantly English. But, that is definitely no rule. Much more serious problems appear at lower governmental levels where the functioning of institutions in the part concerning their international cooperation is brought into question. Respondent S told us that while working as a beginner in the Ministry for External Economic Relations he acted as the chief of delegation in one of his first official contacts with foreigners. It was so because the official who should have been the head of a federal-level delegation at a meeting in Bucharest, two days before the long-planned trip told him: "*You know the language, you are the head*". Luckily, it all ended well, but S felt awkward in this role since he was the youngest, not only in our delegation, but also in the whole meeting and suspected that this might have left the foreign partners with an impression of carelessness on our part.

Respondent LL points to similar problems, but from a different angle. "*So, the administration is old, uneducated, and there is the lack of knowledge of languages and we sometimes, in addition to certain other, occasionally financial reasons, or precisely for that particular reason, do not, e.g. go to all meetings we are invited to attend because two-three men cannot cover everything. See, we missed a couple of session of the CoE Committee for Social Cohesion, we only went once, and it was while we had the status of observers.*"

Looking back to pre-socialist period, the knowledge of foreign languages as a value by itself was nourished only in a relatively small middle and higher civic strata. Learning of foreign languages in socialist schools was obligatory, but 50 per cent of pupils had to learn Russian, and the other half was distributed between English, French and German. Besides, the majority of the population, particularly older generations, due to the lack of contacts with foreigners largely forgot what they knew.

However, the language is not only an important aspect of foreigners' approach to the local population but it, in a different way, also works in the reverse. The Serbs expect the public communication to be conducted in the Serbian language.

Respondent VC who found herself in an unexpected situation while organizing a press conference gives an indicative example. She says: *"In a situation where we have the minister for social welfare, minister of education, deputy minister of health, I am at the head of the table trying to coordinate something that is totally out of my control, and e.g. the director of this British agency disregards my remark that when we have the reporters here and so on, it is nonsensical to have the ministers speak English. Their conclusion was, I think, that money should thus be saved and so forth... and then, naturally, the expected thing happened and the Tanjug journalist-she said excuse me, this is Serbia, I think, and I don't have an interpreter and really do not understand my minister who is speaking English."*

In the above-mentioned case the position of the journalist, who probably had the language problem, matched the thoughts of our respondent who used to work for foreign organizations for years and had spent a longer period of time outside the country. This attitude towards the use of a foreign language on the domestic territory is doubtlessly an expression of cultural nationalism. To substantiate this thesis, let us mention that it is quite acceptable for the members of national minorities to use their own languages in mutual communication, to have education in their mother tongue, to have their radio and TV programs, bilingual street names. However, a spark of cultural nationalism is unavoidable whenever a foreign language, or the language of a national minority is used instead of Serbian in situations where members of the majority Serbian nation are present – for instance in a shop, if the cashier is of different nationality, at a large multiethnic meeting, etc. This phenomenon is hard to explain in any other way but as an expression of suppressed inferiority, or a reminder of an inferior position and caution harboured by the Serbs throughout their history of living under foreign domination. Indicative in the above-mentioned example is the fact that the demand for the use of Serbian language is legitimized by the presence of ministers as state representatives. According to the traditional understanding the state has a primarily role in protecting the members of the majority nation and, naturally, their language as a characteristic of national identity. In other words, we still see the presence of a deeply rooted cultural pattern wherein the state is identified with its all-pervasive, protective role.

In addition to the language, our survey has also revealed the manner of speech as a specific kind of a cultural barrier. *"For instance, if they were keen observers, they learned that we often tend to react in a manner which is, in their view, and I am talking specifically about the British, let's say rude. Therefore, they simply think that you are quarrelling and are very crude, but you actually talk in a way which is quite normal in the Balkans,"* says VC. Although this kind of speech is not characteristic only of the Serbs - suffice only to remember the Italians who are doubtlessly even more temperamental in communication - foreigners see it as an uncivilized manner of communication. In an atmosphere that our respondent assigns to openness, the force of intonation often obliterates the force of argument.

*Written communication and procedure*

A certain deficit of skills of written communication in Serbia is no surprising as it has deep cultural and historical roots. Among the others the important one is the non-existence of the state and state administration in a larger part of history of the Serbian nation. Namely, it took too long for the state administration to obtain the characteristics of a bureaucracy in the Weberian sense, implying that a written act, i.e. official correspondence represents one of its characteristics. This was additionally enhanced by frequent wars and states of emergency more suitable for a commissar-type than bureaucratic form of administration (basically characterized by verbal orders, reactions to the exigencies of situation and the absence of predictability and any procedure at all).

Most of all examples given in the survey testify to the disruption of the expected form of written communication and, closely connected with it, scorn of the procedure.

Our respondent JP says: *“A number of people in the ministry have difficulty understanding that some procedures have to be strictly observed whether they have to do with involving new people or travelling abroad where a certain application procedure exists, e.g. concerning the money, booking of tickets, the whole organization of travel, that there is strict timing ... paperwork to be observed, while our people here think that everything can be done in a day.”*

M summarizes her experience in cooperation with foreign partners as follows: *“They do these things on a much higher level, everything is covered administratively and with paperwork. I am myself, unfortunately in a position to sign what it takes for myself ((laughing)), I am joking, but simply a written word is major responsibility and one has to be very careful about a written document. Written communication is one thing and oral communication another, but that, too, has a way to be done.”*

VC speaks about experience in report writing: *“So, what the foreigners expect from a text is to be concise, clear, without much ornaments, without much – how should I put it, parade, but we have learned precisely the opposite. Thus, we write to blur things, not to clarify them. And that is, quite simply, an entirely different approach – my objective is not to impress a person, but to convey a clear and concise message.”*

Respondent LL speaks along the same lines: *“Theirs are well explained projects, very precise budgets, and that has never been the case here, and they include follow up of results, drawing of conclusions, before designing the project if necessary, and I think that this had its consequences for the hundreds and hundreds, I'd say, project implementers in Serbia from the local level to... No, they all know that the costs are calculated in the projects they submit in time and in a clearly defined tender procedure, and so on. I consider this a hugely important experience,*

*that they have come to understand that the very functioning of e.g. an association, depends on it."*

Closely connected with the matter of attitude towards procedure is the understanding of modern organization and place and role of an individual in it. JP speaks of the experience he acquired working for an international organization: *"Perhaps I was surprised by a kind of rigidity of the system of our work, namely strict observance of rules and procedures, maybe due to my inexperience... We here understand that much more flexibly, with a lot more improvisation... The ministry is completely new... and in this sense there are no long-established procedures, we are still searching for the structure... so that there has been a lot more improvisation."*

He points out that the disregard of the procedure is transferred to the organization of work and advises: *"We should seek to improvise less and stick to procedures more, naturally not in certain matters which are too rigid on an everyday basis, but we should try to cut down on the use of such words as urgent, required for tomorrow, or should have been done yesterday, and work with greater predictability, planning things better in order to have as few shocks as possible. It just happens that one department in the ministry, I will not specify it, is overburdened with various calls, requests for information or simply letters to be answered and chokes on it, while other departments which should obtain the processed information, sit and wait for it to come."*

The understanding of the relation between the procedure and improvisation is the strongest characteristic distinguishing the local population from foreigners, believes P.: *"It is an understanding of responsibility and attitude towards this improvisation at work, which according to foreigners I cooperate with, is something that is done only when absolutely necessary and, overall, they seek to apply a planned and systematic approach without shocking deficiencies."*

BA notes the same thing, but interprets it in a different way: *"What I want to underline is the following: In terms of the profession, they have much better conditions to, let' say, develop normally. They have technical facilities, libraries -- they have -- a lot of things we do not -- unfortunately. However, I think that our colleagues are in time -- catching up with them fast. -- That is -- owing to our resourcefulness which they do not have, our natural, so to say, gene to find the way out in a moment -- and it is very effective, and I see it in my associates, they manage very well when they are asked a question, by (foreign) colleagues. -- That is not the case with them, what they say is strictly directed and profiled. In that respect we are much more -- intelligent than they are, I think in general... because we are -- a nation which had to, so to speak -- adapt itself professionally."* On the other hand, speaking of foreigners, our respondent notes: *"... As soon as you touch him outside of what is -- his turf, he stops communicating."*

However controversial they may seem, these views could be defended by the fact that a stable and functional classical organization at the basis of all large achievements of civilization does not tolerate a high degree of innovativeness or personal initiative, especially on lower hierarchy levels. Without rushing into a general conclusion, we could put forward a hypothesis that one of the important differences between the local and European actors has to do with their different valuation of personal improvisation and organization. Respect of regulations, i.e. rigidity, narrow specialization, compliance with the rules of organization, namely discipline, although not explicitly criticised by anyone, do not have a high value for the local actors. By contrast, personal intelligence, resourcefulness, and tendency to improvise are things they speak of with pride.

#### Time and deadlines

*“The train is not there in order to arrive on time, but in order not to walk,”* a train conductor told our colleague who, unpleasantly surprised by the unusually long journey, asked about the arrival of the train. This essentially funny anecdote points to still present traditional rationality and attitude towards time in Serbia. .

A. points out that the most important thing he learned in his contacts with foreigners is an *“understanding of the need to take deadlines seriously and of the importance of precision on the job”*. JP says that one of the main characteristics of foreigners he noted was their *“punctuality and planned approach to work”*.

Giddens underlined that the modern epoch started with the invention of a mechanical clock, which enabled the division of time from space and the precise measuring of the former. Without punctuality and observance of deadlines, adequate planning is inconceivable. Modern organization is impossible to understand without a modern understanding of time and compliance with deadlines.

The habit of our people to be late for a meeting, or to exceed a deadline without much ado may be irritating to foreigners. But, there is nothing personal in it. Due to the fact that the time and space have not been completely separated in people's consciousness, they have problems in calculating the time required for nonspatial preparatory activities.

Such close linkage between space and time, wherein space is the dominant and time only a derived category, indirectly influences an ambivalent relation towards Europe, i.e. the EU. Geographical proximity creates, on the one hand, a feeling that the time required for rapprochement to Europe is very short – resulting in a relaxed manner and slowness in fulfilling the obligations and, on the other, the feeling that time flies – creating a panic of sorts and doing things in haste. Respondent A points to some consequences of this approach: *“Desiring to do things*

*quickly, they often address them superficially... and the consequence is our inability to legitimise ourselves as entirely credible, competent and professional”.*

The isolation of Serbia contributed to a substantial slowdown in this process of separating time from space, because the people have been forcibly tied to a certain space, and the unlimited time of isolation additionally made time lose its autonomous importance. In addition, actual relations with foreigners, although they, on an abstract level, contribute to developing the conscience on the importance of observing the deadlines and time as values by themselves, have yet another dimension. It often happens that foreigners in their communication with local partners set unusually short deadlines for response to their initiatives. VC finds it vexing that foreigners *”always insist on impossible time frames”*, especially because their own reactions are awaited even a few months at a time. That may probably be assigned to their experience in working with representatives of traditional societies. The inclination to generalize the experience acquired results in the imposition of unnecessary demands without exceptions, in order to ensure an answer within a reasonable period or provide the time to correct a possibly inadequate response. However, this practice only adds to the conviction of local partners that foreigners who care for deadlines very much do not have an adequate approach themselves.

### Values

Before we establish that the most frequent and deepest source of tensions in the cooperation of local political elites with foreigners are their different values, which we have defined as desirable objectives guiding the actions of the above-mentioned actors, let us take a look at several examples that illustrate the dissatisfaction of local politicians with negative stereotypes foreigners have concerning this country. This is, in a milder form, manifested in references to the positive surprise with what foreigners find here on arrival and, in a stronger form, in their disapproval of projects based on criteria applied in completely undeveloped countries; an inadequate role given the local actors in project implementation and incompetence of foreign experts.

JP: *“When we started on September 1, we had the so-called project document written by a British consultant who had been here three or four times... and then we were given this project document to make the project according to it. As it happened the project document anticipated three months of analyses, planning and forecasting without specific actions, which we found inconceivable, because we saw alarming things on all sides and, especially when relevant legislation is concerned ..... What happened here was not because we sought to get away from the project document, but we saw that it had to be changed as it was simply no good, but we did not manage to revise the project in time, to draw a practically new plan and then work*

*according to it, but set out to work and make relevant adjustments along the way. This was simply in order not to let the events run amok, since there were countless things in the ministry needing a push and we had the impression that if we left them alone and waited, they would escape control. And we believed that there was time to write the project document, 15 or 20 days sooner or later, no doubt about that, but that, on the other hand, we stood to lose a lot and then we launched this action and quietly supported this work plan, postponing its elaboration for November. And that is when the conflict started, because the UNDP was opposed to it and demanded a work plan and the conflict arose from the fact that the ministry had its needs which we were bound to attend to and the UNDP had its needs and we had to work like slaves to satisfy both sides."*

LL: *"Speaking from my experience we saw a lot of misunderstanding on the part of international organizations and government organizations, coming here with projects we did not consider a priority. I will mention one example, I find the most drastic. You know how long we had refugees in this country and then after eight years someone comes with a project involving a lot of money, for psychosocial support to the refugees. Many of the people engaged in these organizations have experience in managing humanitarian disasters in really underdeveloped parts of the world, and when they come here they often lack the information that the social welfare system did and still exists here. Naturally, it deteriorated during this decade of war and sanctions, but the system is there, the procedures and professionals are there and so on. So initially, – I have the impression that there is some money which has to be urgently spent... and when you look at the project you see that it is about their experts. I understand that the price of expert work in the West is high, but it is inordinately high in terms of its effects in our conditions, the effects the work of an expert in psychosocial treatment may produce.*

M: *"The man was -- the so-called social policy adviser. .He had not worked in Europe for years and, did not, absolutely did not have any work experience /.../ in transition countries -- but that he had spent the last 10 or 15 years in Africa. That is, no doubt, a milieu completely different from -- ours. The questions he asked were really -- incredible -- and the man was astonished and taken aback, for instance, asking if social relief is provided on the level of the state or municipality. And when he was told that this is still -- guaranteed by the state and that the state takes care of that, and -- that this is more or less how it functions in most countries, except for a few special things which are taken care of on the local level, he was very much surprised and kept saying 'how interesting, how interesting'. -- So after responding to all his -- questions of this type, -- I had to ask about his background and found out that he spent 10 years in a -- village settlement in Africa ... I was surprised that a person /.../ with such a background, simply -- did not find the time to inform himself about the country where he was going to and where he was supposed to establish or assist in the articulation of a programme."*



VC: *“It was about -- an exploratory mission with a British -- organization -- There were practically three players in the whole combination and the ministry was there -- an important player, because it was again a project related to the reform of the social system. But, it was an important player also because -- this British agency would have never been given the money -- for this thing had the ministry not practically said that it -- not only supported the project but also was practically a partner. -- -- I joined the whole affair trying to coordinate things and saw that nothing could be coordinated. ... The British -- simply have their own way. -- I tell them my story and they listen to me, I think, carefully, and then do the opposite ”*

S quotes the example of EU experts *“who wrote a report on the situation here, a completely copy-paste thing and moreover not updated. For example, they refer to the last election of 1996, plodding through the job for a lot of money. We do not pay them, but all this money is registered as assistance to us”*.

A closer look at quoted experiences reveals a red thread weaving through all above-mentioned stories. It has to do with a different understanding of objectives the activities of foreign and local partners are guided by. The foreigners' main purpose is to, more or less professionally, do the job they are paid for. Their ultimate aim, i.e. primary value, is to justify the trust and money obtained from the organizations that sent them here. The direct consequences, or rather the obvious usefulness of their activities for improved local conditions of life may, but do not necessarily have to guide their actions. On the other hand, the main purpose of local actors is to help their country solve the specific accumulated problems. They see the justifiability of certain activities only in the context of their direct effects. Implementation of objectives planned by project documents has no value in itself for the local actors, and may be considered worthwhile only if it directly removes the identified problems.

This opens the question of the level where cooperation is taking place. However, even at a higher level there is the question of objectives of the organizations managing the projects. Or rather of the values they are guided by in planning the projects concerned? The reasonable answer is doubtlessly to qualify Serbia for active participation in the EU, i.e. for Serbia's rapprochement to the Copenhagen criteria, summarizing the basic EU values – market economy, respect for human rights and democracy.

This, in our view, makes room for misunderstandings. The activity of the local political elite is not necessarily guided by the above-mentioned values. The main value it looks to is solving the problems, which in the view of its members stand in the way of achieving the European standards of material and political life. To this end all activities are considered legitimate, including even those that are in discord with European criteria – let us only mention the example of the careless manner with procedure as a constituent element of democratic decision-making. The

main problem is thus in the fact that the local political elite, guided by its own values, often acts contrary to one of the basic values of Europe – the respect for the established norms.

The awareness of this value difference is slowly penetrating the Serbian political elite. This may explain the apparently contradictory and inconsistent statements of our respondents who generally assess cooperation with foreigners as extremely open, partner-like, good and useful but, while speaking of the details, point to the problems made evident by the above-mentioned examples.

This process of approaching value positions will be neither fast nor easy. Still it has already started, as evidenced by statements like those of the following respondents:

LL: *"I can tell you that what is here often experienced as conditioning on the part of the international community and international organizations essentially is not that. Thus, the largest number of these conditions, and I do not like to use this term, imposed by international organizations are essentially our own objectives, whether you recognized them as such at once or not. Therefore, for me, this cooperation has so far been one of partners and the possible misunderstandings, if any, happened at the beginning."*

A: *"There is mistrust of Europe... when I speak of Europe to older people they ask what is their (European) interest. We have not yet understood what European integration means, specifically the economic part with this principle of solidarity at the basis of this whole story of European integration, i.e. the EU, ... and we have yet to understand what it means on a European level and see that it is not always the question of someone's interest, a conspiracy, something that can be expressed in terms of money - and it quite often, or in most instances, is - but we must understand that there is a project which has been going on for 50 years now and that we simply have to become a part of it."*

A deep contradiction in the cultural pattern of most Serbs, manifest in their openness and sincerity bordering on naivety, on the one hand, and caution, scepticism and mistrust even where unwarranted, on the other, coupled with insufficient knowledge of what the European project implies result in inconsistency and whims which often confuse the foreign partners.

Still there is one thing we do not agree with and have not found an appropriate example of in this survey, namely the often flatly expressed view that the fundamental values of the Serbian and European society are in disagreement. Orientation towards material values, freedom, leisure, importance of personal achievement, declarative emphasis on the values of human rights, market and democratic political order, form the joint value pattern at the basis both the EU and Serbian political elites. An unmistakable confirmation of this conclusion is found in the statement of one of our interviewees W from Germany: *"Serbia is a European*

*country and a very European country, there is a normal - - tradition, European tradition, Western tradition.”*

Only one of the respondents pointed out that Serbia is distinguished from Europe by its understanding of the ethics of work and responsibility. This view of VS is based on personal experience acquired working for a foreign organization: *“How these people work for us, that is unbelievable.”* Still, the question remains whether the work is a value by itself, or a norm imposed by organization that (in the imposed measure) must be observed in order to reach certain values. The latter assumption is substantiated by the experience of S: *“People (in Europe) suffer from the same problems in administration. They like to avoid their obligations, to carry them over to someone else, to prolong their break, there is nothing different... The system of advancement is no different than here. Initiative is not exactly valued, one knows how far one can go. Condescension is also valued. The rules of administration are universal.”*

If, as Max Weber claimed, the ethics of Protestantism had some influence on the spirit of capitalism in certain parts of Europe, European capitalism has, over time, substantially modified and imposed its new spirit as a specific ethics of a consumer society wherein leisure, rather than work, is the priority value.

### **Conclusion**

Summing up the obtained findings, we could say that in consequence of cultural specifics, the following elements emerge which to a lesser or higher degree influence the mutual understanding of local and foreign actors:

Personal relations formed between specific people are in Serbia much more important than those based on impersonal connections between the holders of social roles. This comes as a specific shock to foreigners, but they get used to these relations fast, especially since they result in greater relaxation at work and in everyday life and are reflected in the ways of spending time and money.

Technological and infrastructure inferiority, as well as problems in communication, arising due to the insufficient knowledge of languages are barriers of a kind, but they are neither essential nor insurmountable.

Much more important obstacle to mutual communication is found in the high inclination to improvise and the flexible understanding of time limits manifested by local actors. Accordingly, the local actors have the lack of understanding for the rigidity and respect of procedures and insistence on time limits, which in their view are not justified for the attainment of specific objectives.

In conclusion, we should point out that there is a joint, but once again reverse observation that foreigners, i.e. local actors are insufficiently open for aspirations, ideas and experiences of others. This mutual reproach for reticence and bias, which accompany the rejection of different experience, may still testify to the common European cultural foundations of foreigners who are visiting here and the local population and its political elite.

As our respondent W notes: "*I want to say that there are many differences in Europe, between the European countries. And there are many differences inside the European countries and the good thing of -- the European policy is that it is -- at the centre of this policy is tolerance -- against others*".

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Prevela na engleski  
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