When It Comes to Kosovo, Are Serbs All Speaking the Same Language?

Author: Duncan, Daniel

Academic Director: Orli Fridman

Project Advisor: Zdravković, Helena

Swarthmore College

Major: Linguistics

Minor: Peace and Conflict Studies

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Serbia, Bosnia, and Kosovo: Peace and Conflict Studies in the Balkans, SIT Study Abroad, Fall 2011
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .................................................................................. 2

Abstract ................................................................................................. 3

Introduction ........................................................................................... 4

Literature Review .................................................................................... 5
  Schrodinger’s Country? ......................................................................... 5
  What Does Serbia Want? ..................................................................... 6
  Serbs, Essentialized ........................................................................... 8
  What’s the Difference? ......................................................................... 10

Methodology ........................................................................................... 12

Interviewees ........................................................................................... 13

Data ......................................................................................................... 14
  Are We Speaking the Same Language? ................................................ 15
  What Else Is Different? ....................................................................... 17
  Što Južnije, To Tužnije ....................................................................... 20
  Perceived Differences ........................................................................ 21
  What’s Happening Down There? And Who Cares? ............................. 24
  What Should and Will Come to Pass .................................................. 28
  I Am More Objective Than You Are .................................................. 32

Analysis ................................................................................................ 33
  The Urban/Rural Divide .................................................................... 33
  Who Is Officially a Serb? .................................................................. 34
  Addressing the Conflict ...................................................................... 36

Limitations and Further Research .......................................................... 37

Conclusion ............................................................................................. 38

Works Cited ........................................................................................... 40

Appendix A: Interview Questions ......................................................... 43

Appendix B: Map of Serbia and Kosovo ................................................ 47
Acknowledgements

This ISP would not have been possible if not for the following people:

- Helena Zdravković, my advisor.
- Nikica Strižak, who graciously translated an interview after my language skills were vastly overestimated by the participants.
- Dragana Stanić, who helped me coordinate interviews in Gračanica

Thank you!
Abstract:

Ever since the conflict in Kosovo of 1998-99, the Serbian government in Belgrade has spoken and negotiated on behalf of the Serbs living in Kosovo. It is no wonder, then, that Western media and academia essentialize Serbs as the same, and more importantly, thinking in the same way about Kosovo’s status and future. How do Serbs really perceive each other? And how do these potential differences translate into views on Kosovo?

To begin to understand this, I conducted five one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with young adults in Belgrade and Gračanica, the largest Serb enclave in Kosovo. I additionally conducted two semi-structured group interviews with young adults in Gračanica. These interviews centered on differences between people in Belgrade and Gračanica, stereotypes of the other, what will happen in regard to Kosovo, and what should happen in regard to Kosovo.

The data revealed a divide between Serbs in Belgrade and Gračanica, centered on cultural and accessibility differences between urban and rural areas. This urban/rural divide, however, is not enough to explain the differing attitudes toward efforts at resolving the Kosovo conflict—while interviewees agreed Belgrade is moving toward recognizing Kosovo as an independent state, views of how beneficial or good that move is were split between Belgrade and Gračanica. Using Bourdieu’s discussion of symbolic power created and maintained through “official” institutions such as language, I argue that Serbs in Belgrade are seen and presented as “official” Serbs, holding power over the second-class, “unofficial” Serbs in towns in Kosovo like Gračanica.
Introduction:

In recent weeks, there have been two big stories in the news about Kosovo\(^1\). On one hand, Belgrade and Prishtina are resuming talks, in part due to pressure from Europe regarding Serbia’s accession to the European Union (EU)\(^2\). On the other, some 20,000 Serbs from Kosovo have applied for Russian citizenship (Barlovac, 2011)\(^3\), claiming that it will guarantee their safety in the Albanian-dominated region. These two stories, while interesting on their own, form a bizarre juxtaposition. In the former, one may see that Serbia, or more specifically, the government in Belgrade, is seen on an international level to speak on behalf of the Serbs in Kosovo. But in the latter story, one sees that the Kosovo Serbs perhaps do not accept this view. This is made especially clear in headlines such as “Russian passports will save the Serbs of Kosovo”\(^4\)” (Trukhachev, 2011). Where is the trust in Belgrade implied by the first story? Is there really a rift?

In a nutshell, these news stories explain the purpose of this independent study project. My aim is to explore perceptions Serbs have toward one another, in both Serbia proper and Kosovo. Through understanding how Serbs see and relate to one another, we may better understand what is currently happening regarding Kosovo’s status. Throughout this paper I will be focusing on two main problems: 1. what perceptions, if any, exist; and 2. how these perceptions affect the conflict over Kosovo’s status as a country.

---

1 A note on names in Kosovo: I have opted to use the common English name—this in no way is a political statement. I will spell the capital Prishtina—deferring to the majority Albanian population. Likewise, my spelling of Gračanica will defer to the majority Serb population.
2 This has since been delayed by the EU.
3 Since then, this request has been rejected by the Russian government.
4 Translated from the Russian «Российские паспорта спасут сербов Косова».
Literature Review:

As with the other conflicts around the disintegration of the SFRJ, there is a plethora of literature about the conflict in Kosovo. Much centers on the events that happened, while some also includes ideologies that led to the conflict. Since Kosovo’s declaration of independence in 2008, another common theme asks the question of what Serbia will do next. As we will see, however, the literature often treats all Serbs involved as the same—ignoring or passing over any differences within the group.

Schrodinger’s Country?

Like the famous thought experiment, in which a cat in a box is both alive and dead until observed by an outsider, Kosovo seems to exist in a state of both statehood and non-statehood, depending on how one observes it. Ask a Serb, and you will probably hear that Kosovo is not a state. Ask an Albanian, and you will probably hear it is. Cross the border, get your passport stamped, and see the government buildings in Prishtina—it seems like a state. But cross the border without getting your passport stamped, and then watch as the ever-present United Nations (UN) and Kosovo Force (KFOR) vehicles roll by. With all of the international organizations present, maybe it is not a state, after all. How did this come to be?

While Kosovo was an autonomous province of Serbia in the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ), it has been out of Serbia’s direct control since the 1998-1999 conflict (Judah, Kosovo: What everyone needs to know, 2008, p. 53). At first an internal matter between Serbia and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), NATO intervened amid evidence of Serbian crimes against humanity in the spring of 1999 by bombing the Former Republic of Yugoslavia. After the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1244, Kosovo was technically a part of the
Former Republic of Yugoslavia, but was administered by the United Nations (Judah, Kosovo: What everyone needs to know, 2008, pp. 81-91).

As the region was rebuilt, certain standards were set by the UN—involving everything from living conditions to practices of government. Only after these standards were met were talks over the final status of Kosovo (independent, part of Serbia, etc.) supposed to have occurred. The existence of “parallel institutions” in Kosovo did not help these standards to be met. As the UN and Kosovo set up a system of government, including not just representation but documents, schools, etc., Serbia kept the existing system in place. Especially in the area north of the Ibar River, which is predominately Serb, people tended to use the Serbian institutions, rather than the Kosovar ones (Judah, Kosovo: What everyone needs to know, 2008, p. 101).

However, it was the outbreak of violence in March 2004 that led to the international community’s abandonment of standards and push for solving the status question. In response to the violence, discussions led by Marti Ahtisaari were held to determine Kosovo’s status. The result of these discussions, called the Ahtisaari Plan, essentially would have led to an independent Kosovo. Serbia refused to accept the Plan, and it has not been officially accepted by the UN Security Council. When Kosovo declared independence on February 17, 2008, however, it said it would implement the Plan (Judah, Kosovo: What everyone needs to know, 2008, pp. 110-15).

*What Does Serbia Want?*

Serbia does not recognize Kosovo’s independence, and went so far as to have its Parliament annul the 2008 declaration of independence. In fact, at first, Serbia’s loss of control led it to strengthen the so-called parallel systems in the hope of preventing the government in Prishtina from ruling (Haug, 2011, pp. 352-53). However, the government appears resigned to
losing at least part of Kosovo. While still insisting that Kosovo is part of Serbia, in 2010 Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremić privately remarked to US Ambassador Mary Warwick that the conflict over recognition of Kosovar independence was “humiliating for Serbia” (Warwick, 2011). In addition, a recent survey found that 61% of those polled in Serbia feel Kosovo was “lost” (Judah, Serbia: Is the good news old news?, 2009, p. 26). Today, there are some advocates for a partition of Kosovo north of the Ibar River. It should be noted that even as early as 1999, scholars argued that Serbia wanted a partition of Kosovo—preferably taking for itself the industrial city of Mitrovica and the valuable mines at Trepca (Spahu, 1999, p. 8).

This realization does not mean the rhetoric that Kosovo is part of Serbia is any lessened. Especially since the late 1980’s, the myth of the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 between Serbs and the Ottomans, in which the Serbian Prince Lazar chose a heavenly kingdom over his earthly one, has been perpetuated. This myth is used to claim that Kosovo is special, the holy land of Serbia, which must never be given up (Duijzings, 2000, pp. 181-82). If one attends one of FK Partizan’s matches, one may hear the team’s diehard fans chant a related phrase: “Kosovo is the heart of Serbia” (Partizan, vs. Rad, 2011 and vs.Hajduk, 2011). Much of the language about Kosovo suggests Kosovo is part of Serbia, or possessed by Serbia. Czerwiński explains how media accounts of Kosovo’s declaration of independence talk about the “loss” of Kosovo—thus presupposing Kosovo was ever truly a part of modern Serbia (Czerwiński, 2011, pp. 305-07).

The contrast between Belgrade’s rhetoric and potential endgame have been noticed by outside observers. Judah writes that in recent years it seems Serbia will stand by Serbs until it is convenient not to (Judah, The Serbs: History, myth and the destruction of Yugoslavia, 2009, p.

---

5 One of the two most popular football clubs in Belgrade (the other being Crvena Zvezda), named for Tito’s Partizan guerilla army during World War II. The name did not change after the SFRJ disintegrated.
6 Translated from Serbian “Kosovo je srce Srbije”
7 Matches I attended in September 2011
296). He adds, “For years Serbs had told the world that Kosovo was their holy land. But, when it was threatened, most people did not want to know what was happening there. And they certainly did not want to die for it either” (Judah, The Serbs: History, myth and the destruction of Yugoslavia, 2009, pp. 312-13). Haug points out that this double standard has consequences: “Belgrade’s engagement in Kosovo has often lacked sensitivity to the needs of the Serb population in Kosovo, and at times directly increased the threat to their future existence and security in Kosovo” (Haug, 2011, pp. 334-35). Here she refers to Belgrade’s suggestion that Kosovo Serbs boycott Prishtina’s institutions—elections, police, documents, and more.

This contrast illustrates how Serbia is currently struggling to define its national interest, at least so far as Kosovo is concerned. Dimitrijević adds that this is because Serbia first thinks of a national interest as the interest of all Serbs before thinking of the state’s interest (Dimitrijević, 2009, pp. 143-44). The national interest as interest of Serbs in general is, as Judah points out, the interest of a cultural sphere from Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina, to Gračanica, Kosovo (Judah, Serbia: Is the good news old news?, 2009, p. 30).

Serbs, Essentialized.

What is the interest of all Serbs? This question presupposes that all Serbs have the same interest. With a cultural sphere stretching from an autonomous component of one country, through an actual country and into a contested country, it seems unlikely that all of these entities share the same interests. This does not even scratch the surface, either, as some urban cities may have a different interest than rural villages within an entity. Academic literature, however, does not see things this way. Rather, the Serbs are treated as a monolithic bloc.

This treatment is essentialization—the boiling down of something complex to a static, simple description. Much like Orientalism, as described by Edward Said, Serbs and other
peoples of the Balkan Peninsula have been essentialized by the West—historically Western Europe, but also the United States. For example, Goldsworthy explains how group relations, such as Serb-Albanian, have been reduced to “ancient hatreds” (Goldsworthy, p. 26). These hatreds have supposedly gone on for centuries, and in fact Todorova notes that the view of the Balkans has been frozen in time. In addition to this frozen description, the Balkans have been defined in juxtaposition to Western Europe. While the West is civilized then, the Balkans are wild barbarians (Todorova, 1994, p. 460).

As Todorova writes, the region is “geographically inextricable from Europe, yet culturally constructed as the ‘other’” (Todorova, 1994, p. 455). Bakić-Hayden explains how this fits in a broader scheme of defining the Other, which she calls “nesting orientalisms.” As such, the further east one looks, the more “different” it is (Bakić-Hayden, 1995, p. 918). Bakić-Hayden finds a few spheres of essentialization: the Orient, the Balkans, the rest of Eastern Europe—as one travels east, one encounters a new sphere. Each sphere has its own essentializations, and a hierarchy that those fit into. This is especially important in the Balkans—after the SFRJ split, each resulting state fit into a hierarchy of otherness. Slovenia and Croatia, formerly part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, were the least “other.” Muslim areas like part of Bosnia and Kosovo were the most “other,” and Serbia fell somewhere in between (Bakić-Hayden, 1995, pp. 923-24).

What should be noted is that this hierarchy of essentialization within the Balkans means that not only is the region as a whole essentialized, but each constituent group is as well. So how are the Serbs essentialized? First and foremost, they are seen much like other parts of the Balkans—violent and full of ethnic hatred. Consider how Judah writes about the beginnings of the Yugoslav wars, using phrases like “raking over the coals of history” and reawakening “the
old demons of the past” (Judah, The Serbs: History, myth and the destruction of Yugoslavia, 2009, p. 336) But more importantly, Serbs are essentialized as thinking the same, and centered on Belgrade. For example, take media reports on the region—very often Belgrade and Serbs are interchangeable. Consider a recent article that appeared in the Balkan Insight. Headlined “Kosovo and Serbia Both Claim Victory in Border Deal,” the blurb—which precedes and summarizes the article—reads, “While Kosovo says the border agreement reached in Brussels means that Belgrade has effectively recognised [sic] Kosovo’s independence, Serbia says it means no such thing” (Aliu & Andrić, 2011). Between the headline and blurb alone, the author switches from “Serbia” to “Belgrade” and back again. An article from Reuters switches back and forth even more quickly—take the line, “Cooperation between Belgrade and Pristina is a condition for the start of Serbia’s EU process” (Reuters, 2011).

Even Serbian author Momo Kapor falls into the trap of interchanging Serbia and Belgrade in his writing. In The Guide to the Serbian Mentality (again, written toward a Western audience), he equates “Serb” with “Belgrader” and “Serbia” with “Belgrade,” suggesting that the true Serbs are those from Belgrade—as an example, “It is sufficient for a foreigner to spend a single evening in the Writer’s Club basement to complete a short, one-night course on Belgrade and the mentality of the Serb people—through the dishes, drinks, and conversation” (Kapor, 2009, p. 86)

What’s the Difference?

Scholars have noticed a few differences between Serbs in Belgrade and Kosovo. For example, Gordy discusses the urban/rural divide between Serbs. He describes how in the SFRJ, the ruling Communist Party allied itself with the urban centers, or perhaps more accurately, rejected the “backward” peasants. During this time, intellectuals moved away from villages,
while the villages in turn rejected urban centers like Belgrade as not truly Serb. Both sides could agree, at least, that they lived in different historical periods (Gordy, 1999, pp. 10-14). This rift may be seen in Zdravković-Zonta’s article on narratives in Kosovo. This divide is important because, as Duijzings notes, Kosovo has a majority rural population (Duijzings, 2000, p. 5).

In Duijzings’ estimation, another difference between Serbs in Belgrade and Kosovo lies in that “in ethnic ‘core’ zones, where the centres [sic] of power are located (such as central Serbia), identities have been more firmly established. In these areas the state has had a more enduring presence, and therefore the scope for manipulation is less.” In other words, in a place like Belgrade, the state’s discourse of identity is dominant, whereas in a place like Kosovo, contact between groups allows for more fluidity in identity. As such, in Kosovo, Serb-Albanian (among other intergroup) contact led to some assimilation (Duijzings, 2000, p. 13). Malcolm notices a few such examples: Kosovo Serbs have been influenced a little by Albanian culture, and there are Macedonian influences on speech in the region (Malcolm, 1998, p. 11). Friedman clarifies this further, showing how the grammatical phenomenon of doubling occurs in speech in the region (Friedman, 2006). This means the Serbs in the region speak a nonstandard dialect of Serbian. Some scholars consider the Serbian language spoken in parts of Kosovo as somewhere between Serbian and Macedonian. In fact, the Prizren-Timok dialect, also called Torlak, has a folk definition of “neither Serbian nor Bulgarian.” It is important to note that a torlak is also a pejorative name for a braggart—showing, as has been noted, that parts of the dialect have become negatively valued in the region around southeast Serbia (Friedman, 2006, pp. 106-07).

It is not entirely clear which of these differences is important to perceptions among Serbs and the conflict over Kosovo’s status. To use a single example, take the difference in spoken

---

8 Translated from Serbian “ime narodi koje ne govori ni srpski ni bugarski”
9 Bulgarian linguists have claimed that Macedonian is a dialect of Bulgarian, however, that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.
language. According to Duijzings, language is equivalent to ethnicity, and therefore uninteresting when studying identity: “As it is shared language that is usually implicated in ethnic identities as the *sine qua non* of their existence—mutual intelligibility seen as a fundamental prerequisite for any ethnic group—it pushes other relevant and sometimes more important criteria…to the background” (Duijzings, 2000, p. 19). Bourdieu, however, would argue that Duijzings is speaking of language as Saussure’s *langue*—hypothetically spoken by someone who knows their language perfectly, in a bubble unrelated to the rest of society. Of course, such a person does not exist. For Bourdieu, this idea of language is only the official language, socially constructed and bound to the state (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 43-45). The standard language alone is written—pushing nonstandard variants aside. This legitimate language has symbolic power over the nonstandard variant (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 46-52). Silverstein goes on to suggest that there are only certain times, places, and methods for the less powerful variety to show itself. He adds that the dominant, official language is hegemonic, and only it may be used at any time in public space. The less dominant others may be used at scheduled opportunities, but otherwise must remain hidden (Silverstein, 2003, pp. 531-43).

What these disagreements mean is that when conducting this ISP, any difference that arises in an interview must be explored beyond noting the difference. With no academic consensus on the importance of a particular difference, any difference could hold weight as far as perceptions are concerned. Rather than hold a preconceived notion of what is or is not important, I must let my sources be my guide.

**Methodology:**

This ISP was conducted through semi-structured interviews. I chose to focus on this method in order to give the conversation room to go in different directions. In addition, this
method allows interviewees to give narratives without straying from the subject. When looking at the differences between rhetoric and perception, narratives give a lot of space to hear what interviewees are really saying—something that might be missed otherwise.

I chose to focus on two locations for my ISP: Belgrade and Gračanica, Kosovo. While I in no way am suggesting that Belgrade represents all Serbs in Serbia, or that Gračanica represents all Kosovo Serbs, the choices are very appropriate. Belgrade, as the capital and seat of government of Serbia, has the dominant Serb voice in the international community. Gračanica, on the other hand, is a small town outside of Prishtina. As the largest Serb enclaves, it has some power among Kosovo Serbs (note that the organization that submitted thousands of petitions for Russian citizenship is based there), yet, due to its location south of the Ibar River, its voice is under-represented in the media. I chose to interview young adults, as they have come of age after the 1998-99 conflict and may possibly have different views than older people. In addition, their voice often goes unheard among statements and debates among politicians.

As an American studying the conflict in Kosovo, it is important to remember that I am coming from a country that recognizes (and some would say orchestrated) Kosovo’s declaration of independence. This had the potential to make my positionality questionable for interviewees opposed to Kosovo’s independence, regardless of my actual thoughts. Additionally, I feel it is important to note that a member of a group would be loath to criticize another member of their group to an outsider, and that would possibly prefer to express solidarity, which may skew their responses.

**Interviewees:**

I interviewed 15 young adults: four in Belgrade and 11 in Gračanica. They are introduced briefly below; note that all have been given pseudonyms.
Miloš is studying for his master’s degree in tourism at Belgrade University. He has never been to Kosovo, although he passed through once on the way to Montenegro when he was seven years old.

Milan is working on his undergraduate degree in physical chemistry at Belgrade University. When he was young, his family lived in Kosovo, although he was born in Serbia proper. They left before the war started.

Dragan has a degree in architecture and is a freelance entrepreneur. He swims for a local club in his free time. He has no personal connection to Kosovo.

Stefan has a degree in journalism. Although hoping to get a job in the media, he is currently working for an advertising agency. He participated in a program that brought people from Serbia and Kosovo together this summer.

Luka is originally from Belgrade, but has been working at a local non-governmental organization (NGO) in Gračanica for the past year and a half.

I interviewed Sara, Gordana, Jelena, and Nela in a group after an English class at the Studenski Centar in Gračanica. While Sara is originally from central Serbia, the others are all locals.

Nikola, Momčilo, Predrag, Nenad, Jelica, and Marija spoke with me in a group at a local NGO. All currently live in Gračanica, but several were forced to move by the 1999 conflict from other cities like Prishtina and Obilić. All have previously been to Belgrade for varying lengths of time—from short visits to a nine year stay.

Data:

Perceptions and conflict are complex topics, which led to complex responses from interviewees. In order to untangle these responses, I have structured the following sections as
follows to better tread a coherent path: observable differences between Serbs, perceptions of other Serbs, what is happening in Kosovo currently, and what will and should happen.

*Are We Speaking the Same Language?*

By far the most visible difference between Serbs in Belgrade and Gračanica seems to be in spoken language. While many I spoke to agreed on this point, they disagreed on how important it is. Miloš, for example, acknowledged that in Kosovo there is a different accent, but to him the difference is not that big. He emphasized that everyone had the same words in the end. Milan added that the difference is only truly noticeable when someone has lived their whole life in one place—otherwise they blend in with other people. To Stefan, however, “everything starts from [language].” He described the language as “improper,” and very hard for him to understand, explaining, “I was traveling by train two or three weeks ago and I thought that one young guy and a girl… were from Macedonia, but no, they were from southern Serbia.” It was that hard for me to recognize first that they were speaking my language.”

So what are the differences? Stefan described the dialect as having some Bulgarian influence, but also some phonological influence from the local Albanian. According to him, the sounds /č/ and /š/ are harder than in standard Serbian. He said a native speaker of Serbian can hear these sounds and immediately recognize a speaker from Kosovo. For Stefan, the hardest part of understanding a Serb from Kosovo is that they speak more rapidly than in Belgrade, and on top of that, “They connect words so you cannot recognize where is the end of the sentence.” He added that he sometimes has to ask his friend from Kosovo to slow down when talking and not use a local phrase, because his friend is sometimes “incomprehensible.”

---

10 Kosovo is south of Serbia
11 As an intermediate Serbian speaker still growing accustomed to standard phonology, I have no way of personally corroborating this.
Luka also noticed a grammatical difference: —“Basically it’s a given that the people [in Gračanica] abuse the cases\textsuperscript{12} a lot.”

Stefan and Luka, who both were more familiar with the dialect in Gračanica, also displayed that the Serbian spoken in Belgrade is perceived as superior to that spoken in Kosovo. Luka showed this when he sheepishly admitted to me that after a year and a half in Gračanica, “I kinda combined [the local dialect] with my own.” This perception can also be seen explicitly in Stefan’s description of Serbian in Kosovo as “improper.” This presupposes there is a proper Serbian—that spoken in the northern and central regions, including Belgrade. Stefan’s story about breakdowns in communication with his friend is also telling; note that in such cases Stefan’s friend, who speaks “improperly,” is the interlocutor who must change his speech. Even in a conversation among friends, one’s speech holds more power than the other’s. This provides an interesting juxtaposition, as Stefan also told me that while people in Belgrade would notice the speech of a Serb from Kosovo, they would not judge or look down on that person.

By contrast, Serbs in Gračanica do not feel any inferiority because of their dialect, and in fact reject the idea that it is “improper.” If any dialect is improper, I was told, it was Belgrade’s. While Momčilo conceded that perhaps older adults in rural areas—those older than 60—may speak somewhat “incorrectly,” Nikola contested this. What the two agreed on was, as Momčilo said, “One thing is for sure: in Belgrade, proper Serbian is not spoken.” He attributed this improperness as “slangs and everything”—quite vague, but clarified a little when he pointed out that the Serbian as heard on television or radio programs does not match that heard on the streets of Belgrade. The dialect in Belgrade, they told me, is nothing like the literary standard.

\textsuperscript{12} Serbian has a vibrant case structure, in which nouns decline depending on their role, e.g., “Knjiga je dosadna”—“The book is boring,” and “Imam knjigu”—“I have the book.”
This is not to say that the people in Gračanica that I spoke to claimed their language was “proper.” Proper language, or at least something very close to the literary language, is found in towns like Valjevo, in West Serbia, according to Nikola. Rather than “proper” or “improper,” Jelica argued that the local dialects around Kosovo are “archaic.” She found this to be completely natural and acceptable, and Momčilo agreed: “It’s not like you can call it improper. It’s just different.” Jelica added that those in Belgrade do not understand the archaic dialects of Kosovo and other parts of Serbia. She believed the idea of “improper language” was a prejudice Belgraders hold about a dialect they do not know.

What Else Is Different?

Luka told me that the difference between Belgrade and Gračanica was akin to that between heaven and earth. Upon coming to Gračanica, he encountered several cultural differences, especially in family life. To him, families are more close-knit in Gračanica, almost like a clan. Interestingly, although Luka saw these close family ties, he also saw that children grow up faster in Gračanica. He thinks people shelter children in Belgrade, whereas in Gračanica children have to work earlier. The end result, as Luka sees it, is that a 25 year-old Belgrade is equivalent to a 22 year-old from Gračanica.

Stefan told me that Kosovo is a more agricultural region, and Luka felt this was more than just a practical difference. It took him some time to become used to the rural mentality in Gračanica. While “Belgrade is a beehive of activity,” things move slower in Gračanica. Luka sees Belgrade as more cutthroat than towns in Kosovo. Using volunteerism as an example, he noted, “In Belgrade, you can see…men like 28-29 [years old] who are volunteering just to get ahead.” In Gračanica, he said, no one would do that. Sara agreed with Luka’s assessment,
telling me that in Belgrade, people need to adjust to a “fast life,” and that once they grow up, they can only look out for themselves.

Luka also saw that there were differences in how people interact with their neighbors. He told me, “The thing that hurt me the most in the beginning was the gossip.” While he thinks it is normal in Gračanica for people to talk about each other behind their backs, it is less so in Belgrade: “If somebody comes after you [in Belgrade], it’s fucking war.” This behavior, combined with the small size of the town, means “People who are ostracized get ostracized much more efficiently” in Gračanica. At the same time, this means that, as Luka sees it, “People [in Gračanica] are much more street-smart, because there is just one street.”

There are more than cultural differences between Belgrade and Gračanica, though. Many interviewees noted what could be described as a difference in access to things. For example, Dragan told me only 25% of people in Serbia have Internet access. To him, this means that people in rural areas could not get news from unbiased sources. Instead, they have to rely on the national television station, RTS, as well as word of mouth—indeed, Nikola told me that in Gračanica, only a few television stations were accessible. Dragan said people without Internet access are less informed than those with access.

Dragan and Stefan both believe rural areas have less access to education as well, and that this means the people there are less intelligent by default. Luka seemed to back up this claim, noting that the general standard of literacy is a bit lower in Gračanica than in Belgrade. In fact, according to Jelica and Nikola, problems with the educational system are among the biggest problems currently facing local Serbs. Luka explained how he worked with a scholarship program that applicants had to write an essay for. He said, “I had to turn [many] down or say

---

13 Actually, according to the CIA Factbook, 4 million of Serbia’s 7 million people have Internet access—over 50% (CIA, 2011). Dragan is probably correct, however, that there is less access in rural areas.
‘Please, please send me something better.’ Because some didn’t have any punctuation!” He remembered that when a student center he worked with opened, one of the people giving a speech at the ceremony expressed the hope that thanks to the center, students would be able to graduate from college, “semi-literate.” While he laughed at this, Luka stressed that these problems did not mean people in Gračanica were illiterate.

To Luka, the main thing accessible in urban regions that is not accessible in Gračanica is culture. For example, the closest theaters and universities to Gračanica are in Prishtina or Mitrovica—not difficult to reach if you have money, but far away if you do not. He has a sense that the access Belgrade has to these things and more means, “In Belgrade, you can do anything, be anybody. Here [in Gračanica], not so much.”

For people in Gračanica, the key difference between there and Belgrade is experience. Jelica pointed out that Belgrade was never directly hit by any of the wars of the former Yugoslavia. What about the NATO bombings? It is clear from the following conversation that “that” is not looked upon by some in Gračanica as a major experience of war:

Predrag: People in Belgrade can’t even imagine daily issues here.
Momčilo: They faced it in 1999.
Nikola: Yeah but for 3 months, 2 months. Even that is not comparable.
Momčilo: They recorded 10 movies about that.
Laughter in room

This difference of experience boils down to a difference in access. My interviewees in Gračanica noted that they had less access to media, education, electricity, water, and other things; however, the difference for them was that Belgrade had never experienced that lack of access. To Jelica, this means that Belgrade and Gračanica are completely different environments.
When explaining the difference between Belgrade and Kosovo to me, Dragan offered up the phrase, “Što južnije, to tužnije.” In English, this means “The further south, the sadder,” and Dragan emphasized this as he added, “It’s true, really.” For him, this meant the rural villages of southern Serbia, where there is less access to education, culture, etc. Stefan clarified that in this case, “sadder” means “poorer.” According to him, “The more south you go, the bigger the influence of the Ottoman Empire.” Stefan said that the Ottomans, when compared to the Austrians who owned Vojvodina, did not try to build any infrastructure in the south, and that if they did, the local people refused to contribute. After several centuries, Stefan claimed that the people in the south were less hardworking and less developed. He added, “I wouldn’t go so far as saying some people perceive them as savages, but less civilized or more rural, and in a poorer country like Serbia is, these differences are more visible… In Serbia, people have to be ashamed to come from rural areas.”

Dragan told me that “Kosovo is souther than the south region of Serbia, so that’s some kind of…I would say, proof” that the phrase is true. Stefan held a similar opinion: “I am aware that both Serbs and Albanians don’t have fulfilled lives or the chance to fulfill their dreams as everyone should have.” Luka shed some light on this, noting that there are few job opportunities and no industry currently in Gračanica, and very few sources of money flowing into the town aside from the Serbian government. He added that many people lost their past and came to Gračanica as refugees. Unable to see a future for themselves, they live statically day-to-day. As Luka sees it, “Kosovo is a lost generation factory. If you are born in a small place in a crappy country, and you don’t fight your way out of it, then you better learn to be happy and to find happiness, or a meaning of life in your little village in your little corner of the world. Learn how
to drink a lot and not die at the age of 50. Or you know, like, shit son, better luck next time. You know, like, you’re miserable, fuck it. Nobody’s going to block you out of it.” Being from Belgrade, Luka is able to leave—and plans to. He explained his decision to leave Gračanica by saying, “I don’t have anything against this place too much; it’s just that there are greener pastures. It’s as simple as that.” For others though, he does not see an escape.

Interestingly, in Gračanica and other southern regions, there is another rhyming phrase that mirrors “Što južnije, to tužnije:” “Što severnije, to modernije”—the further north, the more modern. In overall meaning, these two phrases are the same—Jelica even used the same historical background to explain “Što severnije, to modernije,” that Stefan used to explain “Što južnije, to tužnije.” Likewise, according to Nikola, this phrase means the north is more civilized, with more (Western) European culture than the south and its “primitive” habits and customs. Sara added, however, that this phrase also highlights how the north, especially Belgrade, receives the most money for investment, as though no other parts of Serbia exist.

**Perceived Differences**

As phrases like “Što južnije, to tužnije,” suggest, many of the “differences” interviewees told me about between Gračanica and Belgrade were not based on observable differences. Rather, many of these perceived differences were expressed as a value compared to the interviewee’s hometown, using words such as *more or less*. In fact, Dragan told me as much: Belgrade is normal compared to other regions of Serbia. Thus, to compare a place with Belgrade is to compare its traits to Belgrade’s. For example, to Dragan, since there is less access to education in Kosovo and the south, the people are less intelligent than in Belgrade. Stefan believed there are several other differences—Serbs in Kosovo are more relaxed, less disciplined, and less civilized than those in Belgrade. Additionally, Kosovo Serbs are less organized and do
not work as hard as in Belgrade. Because they are less educated, Stefan felt those in Kosovo are easier to manipulate than those in Belgrade. Even more positive assessments of Kosovo Serbs fell into this framework—Luka told me, for example, that Serbs in Gračanica are more grounded than Serbs in Belgrade.

There is another kind of perceived difference between people in Belgrade and Gračanica: the stereotype. As Stefan told me, “Even in one country, people perceive other parts of the country…as some foreigners or strangers.” Luka added that these perceptions are rooted in society—as an example, he offered that his father says Serbs from Kosovo are thieves. Luka’s father, however, has no personal connection to the region (aside from his son working there). There is also a perception that Serbs from Kosovo who are now in Belgrade steal jobs from hardworking Belgraders. Luka told me people think Serbs from Kosovo “play the victim”—making money off selling land to Albanians, but still claiming that they are refugees who lost their homes. He added that there is a sense that Kosovo Serbs who move to Serbia proper are considered traitors for abandoning Kosovo. An acquaintance of mine added that when she traveled to Kosovo, her friends in Belgrade asked why she would go to “that shithole” and talk to peasants.

Those in Kosovo are aware of such stereotypes about them. Nikola told me, for example, “Most of them think that we all here just make a lot of money from international organizations, travel a lot, and live like kings, not knowing the smallest part of our difficulties we’re facing.” Jelena added that she believed some Serbs, especially those living in an Albanian part of Kosovo, may be seen as having “sold” Kosovo and, as a result, having the money to drive nice cars. She felt these Serbs may be called Šiptars by those in Belgrade. As Marija explained to

14 While in the Albanian language, Shqip is the language and Shqiptar is an Albanian, in Serbian the proper terms are albanac and albanski. Use of Šiptar in the Serbian language is seen as derogatory.
me, it is not only Serbs living in Albanian parts treated this way. When she was 12 years old, she and her family fled as refugees to Smederevo, in central Serbia. From the first day of school, she said, students and teachers alike called her “Šiptarka.” As she pointed out, it is unimaginable that other 12 year-olds would think of this themselves—it had to be a taught stereotype. After a year, life for her and her family was so uncomfortable that they returned to Kosovo.

Of course, some people hold stereotypes about Belgrade as well. In an interesting twist, Luka said people in Gračanica feel anyone who comes to the town from Belgrade are coming to steal jobs and money—much like the sentiment from Belgrade toward Kosovo. The reason, however, is different; while Kosovo Serbs supposedly play the victim, people in Gračanica feel people in Belgrade view themselves as privileged. Nikola shared that some young people do indeed view Belgraders as conceited, or cocky—he was clear this view only referred to those in Belgrade. According to Luka, he was also viewed as a “know-it-all” when he first came to Gračanica. My acquaintance from Belgrade had a similar experience; she said Serbs felt she came to Kosovo to tell them what to do. Dragan told me people in Kosovo and southern Serbia have a view that Serbs in Belgrade are “un-Serbs,” because there is less nationalist sentiment in Belgrade than in those regions. He also felt Belgraders were viewed as “atheist,” because of their access to the Internet and American culture.

On the whole though, people in Gračanica deny holding stereotypes about Belgrade, and claim that those who do hold such views are a minority. They explain that this is because people in Belgrade have little contact with those in Kosovo, while most Serbs in Gračanica have visited Belgrade at least once, and often have family and friends there. Since, as Momčilo said, “People [in Gračanica] know lots of things about Belgrade,” they do not need to resort to stereotypes when discussing the people there. In contrast, Jelica said, Belgraders “don’t know nothing about
here.” She explained that Kosovo is something strange and exotic for Belgraders, who only hear about it in the media. This claim is supported by Sara, who admitted to holding a prejudice about people in Kosovo before moving to Gračanica. Now that she has lived there for some time, she found that her view of the people has changed for the better.

*What’s Happening Down There? And Who Cares?*

Everyone I spoke to in Belgrade professed themselves to keep up with the news, often from multiple sources. This did not mean, however, that they knew about life in Kosovo. While aware of barricades north of the Ibar River and problems with access to electricity, Milan said he did not know what day-to-day life is like there. Miloš added, “I’m really wondering about what’s happening with kids in schools and public system there.” Interviewees explained to me that Kosovo only appears in media in Belgrade when something happens—meetings, clashes, etc. When Kosovo does appear in the media, interviewees said reports carried a lot of emotional rhetoric. Milan and Stefan both said that phrases like “Kosovo je srce Srbija” are first broadcast before people repeat them. Nikola, who had worked for nine years at the national station, RTS, before returning to Kosovo, added that “the media never gives the right perspective.” The perspective the media does give, Jelica said, concerns only northern parts of Kosovo, adding, “We [in Gračanica] are not important in that story.”

Discussions Luka has had with friends in Belgrade illustrate how little people in Belgrade know about Kosovo. He said when he first moved to Gračanica, most people’s reactions in Belgrade were to tell him how brave he was for doing so. Once there, he was asked, “Is there still war?” and if he was alright. While Gračanica is a safe place right now, with little of the conflict in the north of Kosovo, Luka said he sometimes hears from people in Belgrade after a clash in the north. When asked if he is safe, his response is, “I’m in Gračanica, we’re safe here.
This is like the privileged hood where Serbs can come and be Serbs. It’s like a fancy ghetto.”

This experience shows what Jelica and Nikola told me: that since most people in Belgrade have not been to Kosovo, it is a strange land for them that they know little about. Luka added that Belgrade’s media tends toward hyperbole, often exaggerating reports of violence and food or medicine shortages.

This would explain why there is a sense in Belgrade that life is hard for Serbs in Kosovo, since several interviewees expressed that they feel sorry for the people there. For some though, the emotion felt is more complex than mere sympathy. Dragan, for example told me, “I can regret for people in Kosovo—I mean, I know how hard they live. But some part of me is telling me, look, they voted for Milosević! I mean, they had no other solutions, but there is some kind of anger in me and other people here because they gave Milosević many votes.” Milan, on the other hand, feels the situation is not as bad as people claim, and so has less sympathy: “It’s kind of pointless just to be sorry for those people because if their life was bad, [they would] never choose to live there. It’s their decision to stay there. I kinda think that the situation is not as bad as sometimes they try to show us.” While he acknowledged some problems between Albanians and Serbs, he pointed out that there are similar problems all around the world. Above all, even if he cared more, he could not do anything to change the situation.

Many in Belgrade seem to have a disinterest in what occurs in Kosovo. Miloš told me this is because the conflict has run for so long already, with nothing appearing to change. According to him, people in Belgrade have become apathetic to everyday occurrences, only reacting to big events. Milan feels that the only people who care are those either from Kosovo or with family there. He explained that this is because in Serbia, no one has time to worry about other people’s problems, adding, “I care about them as much as they care about people in
Subotica or anywhere else in Serbia.” Even Luka, who has been living in Gračanica, conceded that “When I go back, it will be very hard for me to continue thinking about Kosovo.” He pointed out that it is “a hassle” to think about Kosovo when in Belgrade—one has to go out of their way to be informed. To Luka, no one in Belgrade can be informed about Kosovo without going to Kosovo and meeting the people there. Residents of Gračanica are aware of this disinterest as well—Predrag told me that a lot of people he knows in Belgrade do not care about Kosovo. In Gračanica, there is frustration toward Belgrade for not knowing or caring what happens there. Many residents I spoke with bitterly explained how Serbia does not care about them or any of the other Serb enclaves in central Kosovo.

As Luka observed, “A Serb in Belgrade who doesn’t have any personal connection to [Kosovo] can only call upon symbolism.” What Luka sees as worse is that extreme right-wing groups like Dveri and 1389 have co-opted the symbolism of Kosovo for their own purposes, so that even people who say they care about the issue do not try to learn about it. He told me, “A lot of people from there will only come to Kosovo twice a year, and only then in large groups. They will come, and they will wave their flag and [shout] ‘Kosovo is Serbia!’ And then they go back.” Residents of Gračanica are split as to whether these visits are good. Momčilo and Nikola debated how much of life the visitors actually see:

Momčilo: Some who are there for the 28th of June, for the Gračanica ceremony, they have a different perspective about the people in Kosovo and they see the real picture of how people live here.
Nikola: Even they don’t see the real picture I think, because they’re only here for a celebration.
Momčilo: Yeah, but they can see where people live here, and in what kind of conditions. People get together and meet each other.

Luka added that some people in Serbia think it is patriotic to say something about the issue, others think it is patriotic to visit, but few view it as a patriotic duty to come and stay for some time. To him, one has to stay in order to truly understand the people and their lives.
So what is life like in Kosovo? Luka said there was little to no industry in Gračanica. In fact, there is a large unemployment rate—80%, according to Nikola. Most people’s income, then, comes from the Serbian government, in the public sector. However, he added that people are “starting to worry about it because the money is slowly draining up.” This is happening at the same time that the government in Prishtina is integrating Gračanica into the Kosovo economy. According to Luka, the effect is that any construction or infrastructure work done the town is performed by Kosovo Albanian companies—not locals. He said that now people are beginning to work with NGO’s and other parts of the civic sector; however, he noted that this is short-sighted—once the donors move on to another hotspot conflict, the money will be gone.

At the same time, some Serbs in Gračanica feel they are discriminated against by the government in Prishtina. Luka pointed out that even though legally all forms and paperwork must be translated into Serbian, this does not mean the job is done well: “They are all translated by Albanians…and [they] translate something that is indescribable.” Nikola added that while these forms can be understood, many Serbs find them offensive. In addition, supposedly bilingual road signs often have the Serbian part crossed out. For those who do not recognize Kosovo’s independence, and therefore refuse to obtain Kosovar documents, there are other problems. Beginning in January, Serbs may no longer use documents issued in Mitrovica to travel throughout Kosovo—without valid Kosovar documents, they may be arrested and deported.

This last problem, as Nikola explained to me, is only for those who are “very rich, or very crazy, or don’t have a family or something.” Otherwise, it is impossible to live in Gračanica without obtaining Kosovar documents. Jelica said that without Kosovar documents, one has no rights; Nikola explained that one cannot start a business, drive a car, or even get electricity in
one’s home without these papers. Predrag added that withdrawing money from a bank also requires Kosovar papers. As a result, nearly every resident of Gračanica participates in the Kosovo system as a part of everyday life. Those I spoke to emphasized that their situation was different from the situation in Mitrovica—since the northern part of Kosovo is connected to Serbia, one does not need to participate in the Kosovo system there.

Predrag told me that those in the north call him and other residents of Gračanica with Kosovar documents “traitors” for participating in Kosovo institutions—even though they have no choice but to participate. In fact, as he and Nikola told me, if residents could choose between systems with no repercussions either way, 99% of people in Gračanica would choose Serbian institutions. Besides, most people still have Serbian documents. Since many people are connected to Belgrade and the rest of Serbia in some way—family, work, etc.—and Serbia does not recognize Kosovar documents, locals must obtain both in order to get by. This is a major problem, as Jelica explained: “I can’t afford bread, but I have to pay 500 Euro to register [my] car or something!”

What Should and Will Come to Pass

There was a general consensus that Kosovo is part of Serbia and that the Serbian government should never recognize Kosovo’s declared independence. From there, however, views diverged between people from Belgrade and people from Gračanica as to what the government or local population should do next. This seemed to stem from the immediacy of the conflict—while it has an impact on life in Kosovo, people in Belgrade are removed from it. As Stefan pointed out, “It doesn’t impact my life now—like when Kosovo declared independence—the same as it wouldn’t if they didn’t declare independence.” Miloš was surprised as he realized
that he felt Kosovo is part of Serbia. He told me he does not think about it enough to be generally aware of his opinion.

The individuals I spoke with in Belgrade were satisfied with the Serbian government’s current efforts to end the conflict. As far as Miloš sees things, this means that the government is engaging in diplomatic efforts to reach a compromise. According to him, this is the “legitimate” way to solve the problem. For Milan and Stefan, compromise means accepting that Kosovo is independent, without officially recognizing it. Milan told me, “I don’t think we should accept [Kosovo’s independence], even though in fact, it’s independent and I cannot say it’s not independent.” He added that there are no ways to return Kosovo to Serbian control. Stefan thinks there are a few ways Serbia can accept Kosovo’s independence without explicitly recognizing it. He offered accepting the possible accession of Kosovo to the EU as a possibility, but was more in favor of Serbia working to become an integral part of Kosovo’s economy. In this way, Kosovo would be dependent on Serbia, which Stefan feels is a compromise between asserting control and accepting Kosovo’s independence. Miloš emphasized, though, that any compromise involving a partition of Kosovo would be “ridiculous” and should not be discussed. As part of a compromise, Milan felt that the Serbs in Kosovo should make a deal with the government in Prishtina. He thought Prishtina would take the opportunity to show the EU and US that it supported equality and human rights, adding, “There are probably a lot of things that Serbian people could use, but maybe they just don’t want to.”

Miloš told me that at this point in time, Serbs’ hands are tied when it comes to Kosovo. Stefan explained this in more detail, telling me that while Serbia may think it has choice between Kosovo and the EU, in reality it does not. He sees that Serbia is being pushed to join the EU, but at the same time, “There will be absolutely no chance for Serbia to get into EU before
recognizing Kosovo.” This lack of choice expresses implicitly what Miloš and Milan told me explicitly: violence should be off the table. While Milan felt starting a war would be a way to regain control of Kosovo, as a pacifist, he was personally opposed to such a move. Besides, he told me, “Right now, I have my university and my courses to follow and everything, and I’m not actually ready to fight for something that is maybe already lost.” Despite his personal views on war, he did not think other young people would be interested in joining an armed conflict for similar reasons. In addition, he pointed out that while a few nationalist groups may be for a war, there is not enough public support—and the Serbian army is in no shape for a war, especially another war with NATO and the US.

In Gračanica, there is a sentiment that compromises from Belgrade make the situation worse for local Serbs. Jelica told me that those in the Serbian government “don’t know actually, what they do.” For people there, she said it is bad enough to live without steady access to electricity, but that things are made much worse by the need for two sets of documents. From her perspective, by watching what Belgrade does, one may conclude that Serbia cares about the territory, but not the people within. Luka explained that this perceived hypocrisy is why “people [in Gračanica] consider Belgrade not exactly their friend.” Nikola and Jelica were upset that the people with decision-making power do not actually visit Kosovo to see the effects of their decisions.

Above anything else, Luka said, “People here need…that symbolic support” provided by Belgrade’s refusal to recognize Kosovo’s independence. Compromise erodes the strength of that symbolism, in addition to, in his view, allowing Serb rights to be abused. As Luka sees it, since Belgrade is calling the shots, the Serbian government is trying to get the most it can in exchange for Kosovo. He believes Belgrade will not recognize Kosovo until the ruling Democratic Party
(DS) loses an election. Then, they will recognize Kosovo and leave the backlash for the new ruling party to deal with, or, in Luka’s words, will “Pass on the turd stick to the next person.”

Those in Gračanica that I spoke with felt as though Kosovo was already no longer part of Serbia. Predrag explained that this was because everything locals do now is through the Kosovo system and institutions—Serbia no longer functions in Gračanica. Nenad added that Serbia is gradually approaching an official recognition of Kosovo as a state, in order to join the EU. Jelica told me that Serbia already has recognized Kosovo, at least unofficially, pointing out that “Officially, Serbia never recognized Kosovo, but unofficially, a long time ago we had nothing to do with Serbia.”

While the sense in Gračanica is that Belgrade will compromise and possibly recognize Kosovo in some way, not all believe that is what should happen. Luka felt that Serbs in Kosovo need to be autonomous of both Belgrade and Prishtina. As opposed to lobbying only in Prishtina, he believes lobbying is necessary in Belgrade as well—otherwise it will do what it wants. In the end, he thinks Serbs will have to champion their rights within the Kosovo system—ideally becoming an autonomous people.

As seen, while both Serbs in Belgrade and Serbs in Gračanica agreed on approximately what will happen in the Kosovo conflict—or more specifically, what Belgrade will do, they disagree on how good that is. In part, this may have to do with the idea that Belgrade speaks for the Serbs in Kosovo. Jelica explained that in theory, Serbia speaks for the whole of Kosovo; however, in practice, Serbia only speaks for the north. Luka said he felt the local municipal mayors speak with the voice of the Serbs in Kosovo. He told me that when Belgrade acts, “it doesn’t have anything to do with the Serbs here. And that’s the tragic part. Nobody asks the Serbs here.” He felt that when Belgrade has recently spoken about the situation north of the Ibar
and called for calm, it is blasé and worthless, said only to look good to the international community.

_I Am More Objective than You Are_

Many people in Belgrade that I spoke with drew a dichotomy of approaches toward the Kosovo issue: objective or subjective; rational or emotional; realistic or idealistic. Although Luka felt this was a false dichotomy toward the issue, and that a liberal vs. conservative political divide was the true pair of approaches, others who described such a dichotomy held a clear preference. To them, it was better to be objective and rational than allow emotion into one’s opinion. Dragan described Serbia as feeling its way through issues, accepting only black or white opinions with no gray area. He adds, “If you do not agree with the government about Kosovo, everyone thinks you are [a traitor].” At the same time, Stefan linked the postwar burning of medieval Serbian churches to an emotional approach to the issue, saying that it made sense for Albanians who lost family members to do that. He felt this response, however, only led to more emotional retaliations. In claiming to take a rational approach to Kosovo’s status, Stefan was rejecting a cycle of violence. Others seemed to view an emotional approach as somewhat futile. When asked if Serbia would ever regain control of Kosovo, Miloš replied, “Maybe I’m much too optimistic, but let’s say yeah.” In this response, he qualifies his answer as emotional, conceding that emotion is probably incorrect. Milan, claiming a realist approach, also claimed more certainty in his opinion, saying that “[Kosovo Serbs] should accept the reality” and make a deal with the local Albanians.

A few interviewees used their preference of an objective approach to the Kosovo issue as a rhetorical device. For example, Dragan told me, “There are a really small number of people who are [as] objective as I am,” while Stefan made a point that since he has no personal
connections to Kosovo, “For me it’s not that emotional, for me it’s trying to be more rational.” This seemed to be a performance for an outsider—by emphasizing their objectivity, perhaps their opinion is more persuasive. More importantly, when they say that they are objective, they imply others are not—and that that is a reason why other opinions are less trustworthy. It is unclear why they performed this for me. Is it because I was an outsider, or more specific—that I am American? This question raises another: are there times in Belgrade when “rationality” and “objectivity” are not seen as positive things?

**Analysis:**

When considering the data, it is tempting to reach the conclusion that because Belgrade is urban and Gračanica is rural, that is the main divide between the two. While it is true that the urban/rural divide exists, it is clear something deeper is in play as well. Only in a deeper context does the conflict in Kosovo make more sense.

*The Urban/Rural Divide*

It became clear after just a few interviews that there is indeed an urban/rural divide among Serbs. This divide seems to be formed through two kinds of differences: culture and accessibility. For Belgraders, the cultural difference is the most important, as Luka clearly showed. When he spoke to me about his transition to life in Gračanica, his observations almost entirely centered on differences between the urban and rural mentality: family life, gossip, pace, etc. This is true for people in Belgrade even though, as Miloš conceded, most of the visible parts of the culture, like religion, are the same. For those in Gračanica, the difference in access far outweighs any cultural differences. While Belgrade has electricity, water, an educational system, lots of media choices, etc., those in Gračanica say they struggle with these on a daily business.
This divide gives rise to many of the perceptions and stereotypes about the “other” Serbs. For example, the rural, slower pace of life shows to those in Belgrade that people in Kosovo are less hard-working and organized, and more relaxed than them. Because there is less access to education and media in Kosovo, Belgraders see that as a sign that the locals are less intelligent and easier to manipulate. At the same time, because Belgrade has that access that Serbs in Kosovo lack, there is a perception among some youth in Gračanica that Belgraders are conceited, cocky, and privileged.

It should be noted, however, that the urban/rural divide does not succeed in fully explaining the feelings between Serbs in Belgrade and Gračanica in regard to the Kosovo conflict. It is not because Kosovo is a rural area that Belgraders often do not care about the conflict anymore—it is because they are removed from the conflict and it does not affect them. For the same reason, then, Serbs in a northern village may find they also do not care about the conflict anymore, just like, as Milan argued, Serbs in Kosovo probably do not care about Serbs in Subotica that much. In fact, Jelica told me that in the sense of caring about people’s lives, people in Gračanica do not care for Belgrade that much. Likewise, when Belgrade make decisions or compromises regarding Kosovo that the locals perceive as harmful, it is because decision-makers do not know what is going on there. Again, the decision-makers are removed from Kosovo, but not because Kosovo is rural.

Who Is Officially a Serb?

By looking at the perceived differences in language, we may see another divide between Serbs. Note how Belgraders that I spoke with characterized the dialects in Kosovo as “improper language.” While those in Gračanica said the same about the speech in Belgrade, there is a key difference: in Gračanica, interviewees identified another region as speaking “proper” Serbian. In
Belgrade, those I spoke with presupposed that Belgrade speech was “proper” when discussing the “improprierness” of the dialects in Kosovo. In this way, Belgrade claims the mantle of “official” language, marking their superiority to other dialects. This is especially visible in the discussion of literacy and access to education. For Stefan and Luka, there is a lower level of literacy in Gračanica, even though nearly all can read and write. But because the dialect in the area is non-standard grammatically, using a different case structure, this means literacy levels are “lower.” Only standard Serbian is written, not non-standard dialects, so while those in Kosovo may be able to read and write, they are not perceived as able to do so well.

This discourse of official/unofficial language infiltrates the broader relations between Serbs in Belgrade and Gračanica. As Duijzings had written that for an ethnic “core” zone like Belgrade is in, the state’s discourse of identity dominates, we see that this discourse not only dominates within such a zone, but over shatter zones without. Perceptions of the “other” Serb begin with Belgrade as normal, or official. From there, perceptions and stereotypes give a trait a value in regard to Belgrade. For example, Serbs in Kosovo are “less civilized.” Less civilized than what? Belgrade. In Kosovo, people are “less disciplined”—than those in Belgrade. The stereotypes I heard among Serbs in Gračanica support this as well. To some, Belgrade is privileged, or conceited—contesting Belgrade’s assumed superiority.

The two phrases “Što juznjie, to tužnije” and “Što severnije, to modernije” provide an important comparison. From Belgrade’s vantage point, the south is poorer, with less access to culture—perhaps inferior. The phrase they use describes the south as “sad”—a negative valuation. In Kosovo, the same difference is seen. The north is richer and has cultural institutions like theaters and universities. But the phrase used in Kosovo describes the north as
“modern.” This, by contrast to “sad,” is not negative. As a result, we see that the phrase in the north claims superiority, while the phrase in the south acknowledges the superiority of the north.

Stefan had told me, “In Serbia, people have to be ashamed to come from rural areas.” This shows the social dominance of the urban area. What is interesting is that among Serbs in Belgrade, being from an area like Kosovo is acceptable once or twice a year. For example, on June 28, it is permissible to express solidarity and brotherhood with the rural Kosovo. Much as Silverstein finds that non-dominant languages and dialects are scheduled within public space, in Belgrade, expression of the rural identity has become scheduled—and only then acceptable in certain places like Gračanica, Mitrovica, or Gazimestan, in the form of the nationalist claim to Kosovo.

Marija’s experience when she moved to Smederevo is the most telling, however. By labeling her and other Serbs from Kosovo “Šiptar,” the rest of Serbia, backed up by a state, asserts itself as the “official” Serb. Serbs from outside of Serbia proper may be Serbs, but second-class Serbs. Compared to the official Serbs in Belgrade and elsewhere, Serbs from Kosovo are seen as inferior. As Bourdieu found that “official” institutions like language are socially constructed instruments of the state, we find here that identity as a Serb has in a similar manner been socially constructed. Living in a region that allows for some fluidity of identity, such as Kosovo, weakens the identity in relation to one from a “core” zone like Belgrade—even if the two identities in question are ostensibly the same.

Addressing the Conflict

In this light we may better understand the approaches taken to the Kosovo conflict. Jelica had told me that Serbs in Gračanica had been told what to do by Belgrade for so long, they were in a habit of it. Belgrade, with the power of a state behind it to give the dominant appearance of
“official” Serbs, would of course claim to speak on behalf of all Serbs in Kosovo. Luka found he was labeled a know-it-all when he came to Gračanica. As a Belgrader, he represented the power that the “official” Serbs, given legitimacy by the state that presents their identity as dominant, hold over the second-class Serbs in Kosovo.

Because the Serbs in Kosovo are “official” Serbs, they lack a voice of their own at an international level. This is what Luka sees when he told me, “People here need…that symbolic support.” Belgrade holds symbolic power as “official” Serbs; by not recognizing Kosovo’s independence, Belgrade puts that power behind the Serbs in Kosovo who refuse to recognize Kosovo’s independence. This legitimizes their claim and makes their voice heard.

However, as I found, not all Serbs in Gračanica feel Belgrade is looking out for their best interests. While Belgrade may legitimize the voice of the Kosovo Serbs, it also puts its interests above theirs. If in order to join the EU, Serbia must accept Kosovo, it will—putting the interest of “official” Serbs above the interest of the inferior, second-class Serbs of Kosovo. This follows along with what Haug has noted, that Belgrade often lacks sensitivity to what effect its actions have on the people in Kosovo. In recognition of this, Luka is probably correct when he suggests that in order to be in the best situation, the Serbs in Kosovo must be autonomous of both Prishtina and Belgrade. They cannot rely on the dominant power to look out for an inferior people, even if they profess brotherhood with each other.

**Limitations and Further Research:**

As with any study, there are limitations to the veritability of this one. In the specific case of this study, the demographics of interviewees suggest that perhaps different results may be found by speaking with different people. Particularly in Belgrade, a majority of interviewees had traveled to the United States—this ability to travel may mean I drew interviewees mainly from a
upper-class income level. This does not diminish their stories and experiences, of course. There are people in Belgrade who feel the way they do, and I tell their story. It is important to note, however, that by talking to different people, a different story may possibly be found.

Gračanica is not the only majority-Serb town in Kosovo, and those I interviewed made it clear that every place has a different story. While it was impractical to do so in one month of research, this work stands to go much further. Strpce, Mitrovica, etc.—these towns should also be visited and better understood. At the same time, it must be understood that not all Serbs in Gračanica think alike. As Luka pointed out, the town has grown a lot in the last 12 years—from a population of 2,000 to over 14,000. He told me the original inhabitants feel their lifestyle is being changed—quite a different feeling than those who moved there! Likewise, Belgrade is not Serbia. To more fully understand relations between Serbs, one must visit more locations and speak to more people—not just in cities like Novi Sad or Niš, but smaller towns and villages as well.

Conclusion:

In Western media, Serbs are usually presented as all thinking alike, and with the same motivations and goals regarding Kosovo. This ISP aimed to better understand how Serbs actually see each other. I believe that the conflict and the paths being currently taken to resolve it cannot be understood without first understanding the actual relationships between the groups involved. By speaking with Serbs not only in Belgrade, but also Gračanica, I was able to see the complexity of their relationship. While one should hear from people in other municipalities as well, this ISP makes a start at understanding that not all Serbs think alike.

Serbia may be small, but it is definitely not too small for some of its citizens to have perceptions and stereotypes of other citizens. Many of these perceptions are rooted in an
urban/rural divide, centered mainly upon two foci: cultural differences, as well as differences in accessibility. This divide is marked by an inequality in power. Serbs in Belgrade are dominant over Serbs in Gračanica, and perceptions that one has toward the other often have valuations of superiority or inferiority.

This has an important impact on the Kosovo conflict. Serbs in Kosovo are powerless—even within the Belgrade system. While Belgrade has, since the 2008 declaration of independence, thrown its symbolic power behind and legitimized the claims of the local Serbs that Kosovo is not an independent state, it can change this as its interests change. However, there is already a feeling in Gračanica that Serbia does not represent the local interest—only that of Mitrovica and northern Kosovo. Furthermore, compromises that Belgrade makes on issues within Kosovo, while beneficial for “official” Serbs hoping to enter the EU, are seen as harmful for everyday life among those in Gračanica. Without understanding the complexity of this relationship, one would assume that when Serbia and Kosovo come to an agreement and Schrödinger’s country either is or is not a state, the conflict will end. Instead, just part of the story will be over.
Works Cited


Appendix A: Interview Questions

I wrote two sets of interview questions: one for Belgraders and one for Kosovo Serbs. While very similar, they change point of view, as I ask Belgraders about Kosovo Serbs and vice versa. I also added potential follow-up questions, whether to probe beyond a one word answer or just learn more from the interviewee. Remember that the interviews I conducted were semi-structured—this list of questions only served to begin the interview process. As I learned more from my interviewees, I began to diverge from this list—especially to ask about things I had heard in previous interviews.

Questions for Belgraders:

Introduction

1. How long have you lived in Belgrade?
2. How old are you?
3. Did you go to university?
   a. What did you study?
4. What do you do now?

About Kosovo Serbs

5. Have you ever been to Kosovo?
   a. How did people treat you?
   b. Have you ever met anyone from there?
6. What do you know about the people in Kosovo?
   a. What about the Serbs there?
   b. Are they like the people here?
   c. Do they look different? Sound different?
7. What do you think they think about people in Belgrade?
   a. Is it fair? Are they right?

Kosovo Conflict and Solutions

8. What do you think the Kosovo Serbs need(expect?) from Belgrade?
   a. Is that going to happen?

9. What do you think the government wants to do about Kosovo?
   a. Will they recognize? Push for partition?

10. What do you think of the phrase “Kosovo je srca Srbije?”

11. What do you think should happen with Kosovo?
   a. Why?

12. What do you think will happen with Kosovo?
   a. Why?

Questions for Kosovo Serbs:

Introduction

1. How long have you lived in Gračanica?

2. How old are you?

3. Did you go to university?
   a. What did you study?

4. What do you do now?
   a. What do you want to do?

About Belgraders

5. Have you ever been to Serbia proper?
   a. To Belgrade?
b. How did people treat you?

c. Have you ever met anyone from there?

6. Do you have family in Serbia proper?
   a. Do you have a house in Serbia proper?

7. What do you know about the people in Belgrade?
   a. Are they like the people here?
   b. Do they look different? Sound different?

8. What do you think they think about people in Kosovo?
   a. About the Serbs?
   b. Is it fair? Are they right?

Kosovo Conflict and Solutions

9. What do you need(expect?) from Belgrade?
   a. Is that going to happen?

10. What do you think Belgrade wants to do about Kosovo?
    a. Will they recognize? Push for partition?

11. What do you think of the phrase “Kosovo je srca Srbije”
    a. Is that really the case?

12. Do you vote in local elections? Have a local ID or license plates?
    a. Does it help you?
    b. What do people here usually do?

13. What do you think should happen with Kosovo?
    a. Why?

14. What do you think will happen with Kosovo?
a. Why?
Appendix B: Map of Serbia

This map is provided so that the reader may understand the locations of towns mentioned in this ISP. Please note that no political statement is meant by the appearance of a separated Kosovo and Serbia, it is simply easier to understand where one ends and the other begins in this format. For reference purposes, Gračanica is a 5-10 minute drive outside of Prishtina, and thus would be located in the same position at this scale.