Constructing the Balkan Femininity: The Case of Senidah, the "Balkan Trap Queen"

Adriana Sabo
ZRC SAZU, Slovenia

My attention today will be focused on Senidah (real name Senida Hajdarpašić) a trap singer based in Slovenia who gained regional popularity in the Balkans around 2018 when she published the single "Slađana" (a female name). Her singing career began around 2010, when she performed mainly pop and R'n'B music, while she stepped on the road to the title of the Balkan Trap Queen through the collaboration with a production company based in Belgrade called Bassivity Digital. In other words, the success and fame came when she embraces the stylistic turn towards what is in the Balkan region today known as trap music.

Before proceeding to give more details about Senidah, I would like to briefly offer some information about the context. As I already mentioned, her career is mainly built in the ex-Yugoslav region, which is most commonly associated with the term "Balkan" when used by local artists and audiences. Geographically, countries belonging completely or mainly to the Balkan peninsula are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Greece (mainland), with Croatia, Slovenia, Romania, Turkey, and Italy having only very small portions of their territory belong to the peninsula. The term is commonly employed as a political one, in order to refer to the countries of south-east Europe, most of which are awaiting their EU membership. The term Western Balkans is also often used in the political discourse, to refer to Albania and the territory of the former Yugoslavia, except Slovenia, which is a member of the EU since 2004, so since before the term was coined. In other words, the term "Balkans" is used in numerous, often contradictory ways, and plays an important role in local politics, but also in popular culture and the media (which I will return to later). The breakup of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, which happened during the 1990s, the bloody war that marked it, as well as the resulting trauma and crisis, however, seem to have the most important role in how the Balkans are conceived and constructed in contemporary public discourses. Namely, the Balkans are most often equated with former-Yugoslav countries.

Numerous studies have been realized in order to explain how "the Balkans" are defined. A large number of them follow Maria Todorova's research into what she called "Balkanism" (inspired greatly by Said's orientalism), in her study *Imagining the Balkans* (Todorova 1997). As Marija Dumnić Vilotijević noted, "in Todorova's work, the Balkans is interpreted as a European 'inner Other', i.e. an incomplete East and at the same time an incomplete West. (…) she emphasized the role of the Ottoman legacy in the region, and we can add the perspectives of general Mediterranean and Slavic connections, but also of Byzantine and Austro-Hungarian empires to the history, and, today highly relevant, Yugoslav heritage and diaspora contexts" (Dumnić Vilotijević 92). What we get when we attempt to unpack the meaning of "the Balkans", in other words, is a mass of varying, fluid meanings, most of which tends to gravitate around the relationship between the Balkans and the East/West, how "we" see ourselves, how others see "us", and how those perceptions influence our own feeling of belonging to the Balkans. My goal today, however, map how the Balkans are constructed in local trap music, in Senidah's music, and how Balkan femininity is constructed in the same process.

To the above-mentioned ideas related to the Balkans, I would also add numerous iterations of the term in local popular culture and music, all of which refer, in one way or the other, to the way life is lived in postsocialist times of often violent "remaking of persons from socialist to capitalist subjects" (Verdery 35). Just like "the Balkans", "postsocialism" (or "post-socialism") is a term filled with sometimes contradictory meanings. I use it to describe the fact that today, the "post-socialist Eastern Europe is fully incorporated into the capitalist world with a semi-peripheral role", meaning "the availability of cheap and highly educated labour in proximity to the capitalist core, quasi-total economic dependence on the core and its multinational banks and corporations, and, finally, the accumulation of debt" (Horvat and Štiks 28). Or, put differently, to refer to various negative results of the transition away from a socialist system, towards what is today often defined as "disaster capitalism" (Atanasoski and McElroy 288). Within such a context, the hybrid genre often referred to as trap, gained immense popularity

over the last decade, and has defined the Balkans precisely as a wild place, where the capital is the only organizing principle, and in which material gain is the only objective worth fighting for – as money is the only thing that will provide a person with a dignified life. The term "Balkan" is also used as a tag for creating playlists and mixes on YouTube or streaming platforms, in song titles or lyrics, and trap is generally understood as a Balkan genre. I will not go into more detail about the local version of trap and its musical/social characteristics, as the subject is very large. I will mention, though, that it is today considered to be a highly commercial and extremely popular genre of music, related primarily to the urban milieu. It is consumed mainly by young listeners whose listening habits are almost completely tied and shaped by the internet, social media, streaming platforms, etc. Musically, it is a combination of hip-hop, EDM, pop-folk, and the songs cover a wide range of topics related to crime, drugs, clubbing, luxury, partying but also sex, love, relationships and so on.

Senidah was born in Ljubljana, into a working-class family of immigrants from Montenegro. In other words, she was born, in a way outside the Balkans, but has nonetheless managed to capitalize on this popular topic within trap music and become its queen. Most of her songs are performed in Serbian/Serbo-Croatian, and the vast majority of her audience comes from the former-Yugoslav countries and their diaspora.

Figure 1. Instagram post by Senidah regarding the statistics after the release of her song "Behute" in 2022

Figure 2. Official Spotify statistics regarding Senidah's music from 2021

One performer's song that very explicitly touches on the topic I'm covering here is titled "Balkanka" (2021), literally meaning "Balkan woman". As with most other songs by Senidah, this one is also framed as a love song – she speaks to a man who seems to have hurt her, and to whom she wishes to show that she is strong and has prevailed, and in doing so, she describes the Balkans, the way of life in the region and so on. For example, she sings: "I don't need a sponsor, I spend as if I were a doctor" – referring to the love of spending money, even if you don't have much, which is considered typical for the Balkan people. A similar reference is made in the refrain, when she says "around the world you hear a black Benz" (hinting at the love for Mercedez cars by the locals, especially those

who form the huge Balkan diaspora in Austria and Germany), noting that she "drives to Paris via Vienna", again marking the cities in which the diaspora is numerous, alluding to the fact that bus lines connecting various cities and villages in the region and larger cities in Europe are a common thing for the Balkans. The song also lists the capital cities of former Yugoslav republics – Sarajevo (Bosnia and Hercegovina), Zagreb (Croatia), Banja Luka (Republic of Srpska), Beograd (Serbia), Ljubljana (Slovenia), omitting Skopje in North Macedonia and Podgorica in Montenegro), with the ending remark: not me, you wanted war.

The music video for "Balkanka" provides an abundance of resources for understanding how the Balkans are constructed, but also how femininities figure in the given context. It begins with a few shots intended to set the scene. Firstly, we see the apartment buildings built in socialist times, most of which are now deteriorating (this motif is present in "Balkan" as well). The shot is followed by a closeup of a broken road, over which a black car passes. Much like in other trap music videos, this one also features stills of "real" people: men in Adidas sweatshirts, with a lot of golden jewelry, smoking; a man looking out his window (also smoking), wearing the signature white undershirt, and again, golden jewelry (see figure 3). The description of the song's video on YouTube lists that it was shot on "Raw Locations" and it seems that the mentioned shots are filmed precisely with the wish to show (a constructed, of course) reality, or rawness of the Balkan context.

Figure 3, Screenshot from "Balkanka" by Senidah

The first part of the video is showing a money heist, but the trope of guns, jewelry, and getting money the easy way again figures as central. Senidah is shown as the leader of the gang, wearing baggy clothes, and a lot of golden rings. Her appearance emanates strength and power, as the entire music video is dominated by an atmosphere of cruelty and aggression. The latter part of the music video pulls to the front Senidah's femininity, as it explains the lines about the breakup that we hear in the lyrics. Namely, her role as the leader of the gang that just pulled off a successful money heist is further emphasized, as we realize that the gang has apprehended a man on whom Senidah wishes to take revenge. She is shown in multiple shots as standing in front of a group of armed men, or walking straight through them as they calmly let her pass. After getting out of her expensive car, the singer sits in front of a man who is tied up, and starts gesturing towards him aggressively as she sings "But really, you don't know me, but you say hello to me. You observe the way I breathe and walk. You talk to me, you repeat a bunch of things". She finally kicks down the chair, and is, as we hear the refrain again, shown standing and crouching over the man who now lies down on the floor, still tied up.

Figure 4. YouTube Screenshot from "Balkanka"

What we see in the music video and hear in the lyrics, is an emphasis on aggression and power, as well as a construction of empowered femininity in relation to weak masculinity. In the case of this song, empowerment is intersected with aggression attributed to the Balkans. The region is, as in other cases, constructed as a kind of wild place where everything is organized according to the rules of the market, and only those who are as ruthless as the market can survive. Just as a side note, when speaking about such empowered femininity, I take into account the large body of writing engaged with analyzing what Rosalind Gill labeled as "postfeminist sensibility" (Gill), that is, the writings of those authors that are engaged in understanding how various signifiers of, mainly second-wave feminism, like empowerment or sexual liberation, operate within contemporary media and popular culture discourses, and how they correlate to neoliberal, capitalist notions of individualism, self-improvement, freedom of choice, consumerist logic, etc. These writings draw on the idea that, in the past three decades, we can follow a kind of omnipresence of feminist ideas – or at least, ideas that feminists and academicians recognize as being related to feminism –, which have accomplished a non-feminist goal: it depoliticized them (by creating a kind of faux-feminism (McRobbie), and turned them into a strategy for selling different products of the entertainment, beauty, fashion, health industry, etc., taking away its transformative potential as a political idea that targets systemic inequality. What the authors have noted is also that we are witnessing a "reduction of postfeminism to empowerment as an empty signifier applicable to whatever issue, product or behaviours need to be sold to women, as dictated by social, cultural and economic conditions" (Dejmanee 120). In other words, they shed light onto the fact that constructions of femininities today, within the popular culture and media, are, on the one hand, defined by what we know to be demands of the more liberal strand of second-wave feminism, and at the same time defined by how those demands get shaped within different markets and the role they play in the flow of capital.

Senidah's femininity is, namely, often presented through the trope of strength, with the emphasis being placed on her 'feminine attributes', although she also often appears (in the music videos, mostly) in baggy clothes, sneakers, etc., adopting the styling that is common for the hip-hop culture. In addition, she presents an 'extravagant' look by wearing a lot of 'bling', having really long nails (also with bling), and wearing her signature irregularly shaped glasses. Another one of her trademarks is singing in a deep register. In other words, it could be said that her image and presentation are a kind of resignification/renegotiation of different aspects of trap, into the local, Balkan, postsocialist milieu. It is interesting to note that such a powerful femininity, which is performed by Senidah in this, as well as in her other songs, could be understood as a result of the Balkan's general 'wildness' or 'harshness'. That is, a trope of the global music industry, which established the empowered femininity as expected or desirable, was renegotiated into an aggressive or even angry feminine figure which is a result of (among other things, of course) the way in which global capitalism operates. Or, put even differently, she could say, "I'm strong because the place where I live is harsh and ruthless, and in the wild capitalist markets, only the strongest survive".

Bibliography

Atanasoski, Neda, and Erin McElroy. "Postsocialism and the Afterlives of Revolution: Impossible Spaces of Dissent." *Reframing Critical, Literary, and Cultural Theories,* edited by Pireddu N (eds). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2018, pp. 273–97

Dejmanee, Tisha. "Consumption in the city: The turn to interiority in contemporary postfeminist television." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2016, pp. 119–33.

Dumnić-Vilotijević, Marija. "Contemporary Urban Folk Music in the Balkans: Possibilities for Regional Music History." *Muzikologija*, 2018, pp. 91–101. https://doi.org/10.2298/MUZ1825091D.

Gill, Rosalind. "Postfeminist media culture. Elements of a sensibility." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 10, no2, 2007, pp. 147–66.

Horvat, Srećko, and Igor Štiks. *Welcome to the desert of post-socialism: radical politics after Yugoslavia*. Verso. 2015.

McRobbie, Anglea. *The Aftermath of Feminism. Gender, Culture and Social Change*. Sage. 2009.

Todorova, Maria. *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Verdery, Katherine. *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.