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Social Status and Prestige in Conditions of Transnational Migration. Ethnographic Study among the Albanians from the Republic of Macedonia

The examination of social status in conditions of transnationalism is an important and fruitful topic since many of the social relations in which migrants find themselves involved in are paralleling or intersecting the social hierarchies and identities of both the destination and origin societies, ethnic communities and transnational social fields. It offers researchers good opportunity to examine the links between distribution of resources, expressions of power and dominance, representations of social identity, imaginaries of society etc. Proceeding from these assumptions, the article examines the dynamics of ways and mechanisms through which social status and prestige are gained, maintained and demonstrated among the Albanians from the Republic of Macedonia in conditions of transnational migrations continuing for decades. Three different domains are considered: the family regarding the inter-personal relationships; the community membership focusing on criteria of gaining and maintenance of reputation and prestige; and the Albanian community's status claims and positioning in the Macedonian society in the context of Albanian-Macedonian relationships. The study is based on ethnographic research in several Albanian villages located in the regions of Skopje, Tetovo and Struga.

Key words: status groups, transnational social field, status-paradox, conspicuous consumption, Albanians, Macedonia

Друштвени статус и престиж у условима транснационалних миграција. Етнографска студија међу Албанцима из Републике Македоније

Истраживање друштвеног статуса у условима транснационализма важна је и плодна тема стога што многи друштвени односи у којима се мигранти налазе одражавају или пресецају социјалне хијерархије и идентитете њихових земаља порекла или пријема, етничке заједнице и транснационална друштвена поља. Ова тема истраживачима нуди добру прилику да се испитају повезаности између дистрибуције ресурса, изражавања моћи и доминације, репрезентација социјалног идентитета, друштвене имажинације и сл. Полазећи од оваквих претпоставки, у тексту се истражују динамика и механизми

којима се друштвени статус и престиж задобијају, одржавају и приказују међу Албанцима из Републике Македоније у условима дуготрајних, деценијских транснационалних миграција. Три посебна домена су узета у обзир: породица у светлу интерперсоналних односа, припадност заједници са акцентом на задобијање и одржавање репутације и престижа, те позиционирања албанске заједнице у македонском друштву у контексту албанско-македонских односа. Студија је базирана на етнографском истраживању у неколико албанских села која се налазе у подручју Скопља, Тетова и Струге.

Кључне речи: статусне групе, транснационално друштвено поље, статусни парадокс, истицање потрошње, Албанци, Македонија

Introduction

Contemporary migration is a complex and multiple process and the movements of people often are not unidirectional – migrants could continually move back and forth between different places of origin and destination. All the more so as contemporary modes of communication and transport across the borders enabled them to work and live in different countries, keeping in touch with those left-behind as never before (Foner 1997; Morawska 1999). Thus, many people are connected economically, socially, politically, and emotionally to two or more localities at the same time and maintain relations with relatives and friends working and living in different countries and localities (Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 1992, 1–2). This is what the researchers refer to as transnational migration and transmigrants. There is no doubt that during the second half of the 20th and in the beginning of the 21st century the migration has begun to play a very significant role in the contemporary world and societies. It is an integral component of the global and local socio-cultural transformation processes (Castles 2010, 1578).

The examination of status in conditions of transnationalism is an important and fruitful topic since many of the social relations in which migrants find themselves involved in are paralleling or intersecting the social hierarchies and identities of both the destination and origin societies, ethnic communities and transnational social fields (Moreh 2014, 1758–1759). It offers researchers good opportunity to examine the links between distribution of resources, expressions of power and dominance, representations of social identity, imaginaries of society etc. (Nieswand 2011, 124).

This article is based on my study of the transnational migration of Albanians from the Republic of Macedonia who have been intensively migrating to West-European countries in search of better livelihoods and living conditions for five decades (since the end of the 1960s). In other articles I have already investigated and commented on the maintained by Albanian migrants close kin relations with their left-behind relatives in the context of their economically and emotionally strong transnational engagement to the places of origin (Markov 2013; Markov 2015a; Markov 2015b). These connections and relationships between migrants, returnees and non-migrants, however, affect the social identities and the positioning of people within the status systems. Thus, the article aims to explore the dynamics

of ways and mechanisms through which social status and prestige are gained, maintained and demonstrated among the Albanians from the Republic of Macedonia in conditions of transnational migrations continuing for decades. Three different domains will be considered: the family regarding the inter-personal relationships; the community membership focusing on criteria of gaining and maintenance of reputation and prestige; and the Albanian community's status claims and positioning in the Macedonian society in the context of Albanian-Macedonian relationships.

Theoretical framework

Status from a social sciences perspective is understood as a specific form of social identity, which reflects the socio-economic positioning of an individual in a social field. Although status identities rely on resources (wealth, educational degrees and office), they are not entirely determined by them (Nieswand 2011, 125). Deriving from the Weberian tradition the distinction between class and status group¹ (Stand) is made – while classes belong to the “economic order”, statuses are to be found within the sphere of the distribution of “prestige and honour” (Weber 2010, 148). Status groups are perceived in terms of communities to which humans belong, held together by an emotional ties (kinship, neighbourhood, ethnicity etc.) and which carry with them positive or negative social assessments of honour (Waters and Waters 2010, 154–155). The mode of behaviour and norms are the basis for status and honour in a respective community. Further, honour of the status groups “is predominantly expressed by the imposition of a specific lifestyle, [which is expressed by anyone who belongs to that social circle], and is imposed on anyone who wants to belong to that social circle” (Weber 2010, 143).

Thus, status is a form of stratification resulting from social relationships and negotiations within the group. It is based on social rather than financial differences (Burgess 2014), but this does not mean that property and wealth are neglected. They could attain great social significance within a status group when they are socially evaluated as a source of prestige and honour. Moreover, lifestyle is closely linked to the modes of consumption; it reflects the standards and levels of living associated with particular status group. The members of a community in their everyday life have to decode the signs of honour and prestige within the process of status negotiation (Nieswand 2011, 125; Hemming 2009, 582). Dress and living conditions, for instance, often are part of such status “impression management” (in terms of Goffman 1959). Therefore, consumption is integral part of this process. Status attainment (and maintenance) can be understood as a process by which people mobilize and invest resources for returns in socioeconomic standings (Lin 1999, 467). In

¹ In the original German text of his essays Weber prefer to use the word *Stand*, though the word *Status* is available in German. The term *Stand* evokes a sense of medieval history. It also implies a focus on rights and responsibilities that members of a shared *Stand* have to each other, especially as expressed through commonalities of life and shared codes of behaviour. In the Weber's formulation, these shared commonalities and responsibilities are mostly independent of any relationship within a free anonymous marketplace (Waters and Waters 2010, 155).

other words, one buys goods socially perceived as prestigious to improve or to demonstrate his/her social position. Close to this is concept of conspicuous consumption – it describes the lavish spending on goods and services acquired mainly for the purpose of displaying income or wealth for attaining or maintaining prestige and social status (Hinz, Martin and Hann 2010, 2).

We need to keep in mind that social status and its determinants depend on a process of communication and interaction through a common set of codes. They are negotiated, preformed and represented always in a given context and in relation to the significant others. That is to say, the codes by means of which social status is communicated are determined by a particular social field (Hemming 2009, 582).

The second important concept in this article is transnational migration. Transnationalism is defined as “the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1995, 48). “Transmigrants” differ from emigrants and immigrants, and from returnees, because by the act of moving back and forth between different places they “develop their social spaces of everyday life, their work trajectories and biographical projects” in configurations of “special practices, symbols and artefacts” across space (Pries 2001, 21). Transnational migration networks based on social relationships and emotional ties could constitute a specific social field, which Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller define as “a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed” (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004, 1009). Transmigrants’ behaviour is described as a product of simultaneous multiple connections to and interactions within the place of origin and destinations. This conceptualization moves the analysis beyond the direct experience of migration into domains of interaction where individuals who do not move themselves maintain social relations across borders through various forms of communication. Furthermore, individuals who have such direct connections with migrants may connect with others who do not (ibid, 1009–1010).

The study of status, I propose, would rely on this understanding of transnationalism. As people have family members, relatives, and friends living in other countries, they exchange goods, ideas and information about being “here” and “there”, as well as the experiences and aspirations they have to both places. Social status thus is essential in describing and explaining transnational practices and subjectivities, especially because migrants are involved in simultaneous processes of constructing social status at the place of origin and abroad (Anghel 2013, 12–13). The literature on transnationalism teems with examples how migrants tend to capitalize on symbolic status and gain reputation in their place of origin whenever they may experience social exclusion and status disparagement abroad (Goldring 1999, 165–167; Glick Schiller and Fouron 1999, 346–355; Nieswand 2011, 135–149; Markov 2015a, 111–115). The mentioned above conspicuous consumption seems to be of key significance in emergence of such status paradox of migration (in the terms of Nieswand 2011) in the examined by me case.

Thus, transnational social field provides a specific socio-spatial context for negotiation, attainment, demonstration of social status and prestige, where the members of transnational communities may reorient the regimes and codes of stratification. Individuals, families and communities could change their social positioning, alter mechanisms and definitions of how status and prestige are achieved and even to challenge the position of the community in relation to regional or state-level authorities (Goldring 1999, 164).

Methodological notes

The paper draws on ethnographical first-hand data, collected from 2008 to 2010 within the contexts of working on my doctoral dissertation under the title “Contemporary labour migrations of Albanians from Macedonia”². Four field research sessions of 10–15 days each were carried out in selected Albanian villages, situated in the western part of the Republic of Macedonia (in the regions of Skopje, Tetovo and Struga). The research also benefited from several shorter occasional trips to some of the studied locations (due to other scientific obligations).

A set of 35 ethnographic interviews with 43 interlocutors were conducted. Respondents were actual migrants (including these who at the time of the interview were on return visits in their places of origin), former migrants, and local people who had never migrated but had relatives abroad. Most of the conducted interviews combined techniques of semi-structured interviews and biographical narratives. Such ethnographic data allow the researcher to observe the changes in the cultural and social experience of the individuals, their points of view and daily cultural practices, and the meanings people invest in their actions (Roberts 2002: 21). This approach takes into consideration the subjectivity of autobiographic narratives, but finds them valuable as far as they reveal the respondents’ opinions, dispositions and attitudes (Lieblich, Tuval-Maschiach, Zilber 1998: 8–9). Simultaneously, the respondents’ versions are compared to information extracted from other sources.

Transnational migrations among the Albanians from Macedonia: Historical dynamics and structural characteristics

I have already mentioned at the very beginning of the article, that the Albanian population in the Republic of Macedonia has been intensively migrating to West-European countries in search of better livelihoods and living conditions for five decades. Due to certain historical circumstances and social dynamics, the nature and characteristics of their migration patterns have shifted.

The Second World War and its aftermath proved to be a turning point in the process of labour migrations from Macedonia. It was proclaimed a republic

² The dissertation was defended successfully at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum (IEFSEM) at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in Sofia on July 18, 2011.

within the frame of the newly-established Yugoslav Federation. During the 1950s, a large-scale project on socialist modernization and industrialization started (Rossos 2008, 244–248). Equal job opportunities were proclaimed for all Yugoslav citizens within the boundaries of the federation. In the early post-war years, emigration abroad was seen as political and social disloyalty to the country and socialist ideals (Janeska 2001, 166). As a result, during the 1950s and 1960s a sizable part of previous seasonal emigrant workers turned into ‘socialist workers’, by moving from rural areas to work in state factories and enterprises (Hristov 2008, 225). A significant portion of the Macedonian Slav population left their villages and settled in closer or more distant towns with their families.

At that time, however, Albanians in the Federation³ were under strong economic and political pressure and they did not enjoy equal opportunities to participate in the Yugoslavian modernization project, but they were also less eager to become part of it (Brunnbauer 2004, 581–583; Pichler 2009, 217–18). In contrast to the intensive migrations of Macedonians from villages to towns as “socialist workers” in state factories and enterprises, the majority of Albanians remained in their native villages. Even when some of them moved to towns in Macedonia and in other parts of the Yugoslav federation, Albanians were not involved in the same way and to the same extent in these internal migrations as Macedonians. Theirs was a short-distance shuttle moves or seasonal male migrations which followed the gurbet patterns known for centuries on the Balkans: an Albanian worker usually travelled to and back from the town on a daily/weekly basis or came back to the village (where their families stayed) at the end of the working season when he worked in more distant places (Mirchevska 2010, 213).

In the mid-1960s the position of the Yugoslav government toward Albanians softened. With authorities trying to ease tensions which had been flaring up due to the oppressive conditions, Albanians obtained more cultural and social rights, guaranteed by the Constitutions of 1963 and 1974 (Milosavljevski and Tomovski 1997, 16–19). Around this time (mid-1960s) the Yugoslav international migration policy also changed, resulting in active participation in the guest-worker programmes of the time. Because Kosovo, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina remained the most economically underdeveloped areas in Yugoslavia, the government directed this new, more open migration policy especially to these regions (Dimova 2007, 2–3). It signed official agreements regulating the temporary employment of Yugoslav workers with various Western European countries which were still enjoying its post-war economic boom and migrant labour was very much in demand (Ivanović 2012, 31–70). In the subsequent decades, labour mobility of Albanian population from the studied area changed vastly in size, intensity, characteristics and main work destinations. In actual facts, all villages populated with Albanians started sending workers abroad. All of them were men and mainly low-

³ Part of them was concentrated in the autonomous regions of Kosovo and Metohija within the Socialist Republic of Serbia, whereas another significant part was under the administrative authority of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia.

skilled. Their wives and children remained in their native places most often living under one roof with man's parents, brothers and unmarried sisters.

A change occurred in the structural conditions of Yugoslav labour mobility in the mid-1970s. The oil crisis of 1973 and the subsequent economic recession affected the host European countries so that they needed fewer foreign workers. Yet, contrary to expectations and in spite of restrictions put in place, migration continued. This time it was structured not around work but kinship ties. Given the circumstances, migrant workers feared that returning to their native country would render their re-migration to the West impossible. Therefore, relatively few Albanian migrants returned, and many ended up settling in the countries they worked. There were also a few cases of clandestine departures for European countries. Some of the young men left to join their fathers abroad. During the following decades the process of 'family reunion' gradually gained speed.

The disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1991 was the next turning point in the history of the studied region. In this year, the independent Republic of Macedonia appeared on the political map. This was a period of deep political, economic and social change in this new state. In the new 1991 constitution of the Republic of Macedonia the state was pronounced as "a national state of the Macedonian people" without mentioning Albanian nationality, which was the case in the 1974 Constitution (Babuna 2000, 80–81; Ragaru 2008, 5–6). Consequently, Albanians were deprived of the right to use their native language in public and the use of the national flag was also banned. Thus, a struggle began between Albanian and Macedonian political elites in order to change that status quo. Ethnic tensions increased leading to the armed conflict in 2001. The signing of the Ohrid Agreement was an attempt to overcome this situation, but ethnic clashes continued and Albanian and Macedonian populations remain strongly divided in their public life along ethnic lines.

On the other hand, the companies established in socialist Yugoslavia turned out to be too large and not suitable for the new market-oriented economy. Many of them began to dismiss their employees or even collapsed (Janeska 2001, 238–39; Xhaferi 2005, 14–17). Ethnic Macedonians employed in these companies saw their living standards fall. For the Albanian population in Macedonia the situation was different as most of them lived in the countryside and only a small percentage worked in the public industry and state enterprises. A very large section of them provided for their families by working in Western Europe. The close networks, which had tied together Albanian migrants and their villages of origin during the previous three decades, allowed Albanian households to make a living. The established culture of migration played a crucial role during the 1990s and 2000s so that migrations continued with high intensity, despite the limited opportunities for going abroad due to the strong visa restrictions for all former Yugoslav citizens. The strong endogamous tradition among Albanians played an important role as marriage became a way of overcoming these restrictions. Hence, the main source of the new Albanian migration from Macedonia during these post-socialist decades has been

the so-called “family formation”⁴. Gradually, the number of women, and consequently the number of children born and raised abroad increased⁵.

The ethnographic data collected during my study clearly illustrates these complex migration trajectories. Emigration, settlement abroad, return and re-migration to a different country co-exist in the Albanian context under study. Thereby different types of migrants (also in the sense of gender and age) living or only temporarily working in different countries, are interconnected economically and emotionally through kinship and friendship ties, in turn also connected to relatives and household members in the places of origin. The dynamics of relations within such transnational networks have a specific influence over the regimes and codes of stratification and social positioning within the family, community and wider – Macedonian society.

Social status and prestige in the family household

In the end of the 19th – the middle of the 20th century the multiple and extended family structures among the Albanians from Kosovo and Macedonia draw the researchers’ attention. The collected ethnographic data even pointed at them as “the last big *zadrugas*” (Erllich 1976; Grossmith 1976). Albanians in Macedonia use the word *shpi(e)*, speaking of family. *Shpi(e)* could be referred to the term nuclear family, as well as to an extended family structure, often gathering three generations and several nuclear families. The decision about the continued existence of such complex family, according to the ethnographic descriptions was in the hands of the elders, and it was not personal decision of his sons. Personal separation was condemned not only by the other family-kin members, but also by the whole local community.

As long as the household sticks together the whole property was a common possession. The interpersonal relationships and personal behaviour, as well as the responsibility and all activities within such family were grounded on strong divisions of age and gender with a prevailing domination of men and elders. Only men were responsible for satisfying household’s needs, maintaining the property and securing the means for investments. The work of each male member was regarded as contributing equally to the common family wealth, regardless his actual monetary earnings. The head of the household (*Zoti i shpies*) often, but not always was the old father. He was the person who administered the whole property. The following

⁴ Family formation migration (or marriage migration) occurs when someone settles in the respective host country because of marriage or cohabitation with a partner already living there. Because even today the endogamous marriages remain strong tradition among Albanians, there are many cases when a boy born or raised abroad marries a girl from Macedonia, and vice versa.

⁵ Between 1971 and 1981 the number of migrants (all ethnic groups) living outside Macedonia increased, the most significant growth being of women and children. In 1971 the number of migrants’ wives and children living with them was barely 2016, but in 1981 it grew to 42,958. Among the Albanians, women and children were around 30% in 1981; in 1994 this percentage was already 49% (Janeska 2001, 201–03).

were among his duties: distributing everyday engagements for each member of the household; managing the expenses; representing the household to the whole community and so on. Inside the house a huge role played the housewife (Zonja e shpites). She was in charge of allocating domestic duties among the unmarried daughters and daughters-in-law – preparation of agricultural products and foods, providing clothes, taking care of the children. Generally, it was not commonly accepted for her to work outside the household (Grossmith 1976, 238–239; Backer 2003, 50–53).

Within such patriarchal and patrilineal social organization, each Albanian family household was related to others through important ties and relationships – some of them proceeded from the patrilineal descent, and others arose from the marriage bonds. In this complex family-kin system, dignity, honour and prestige were of an essential importance. All of the above could be “earned” in one of these ways – by diligent working within the family household, by respecting the established rules, by honouring the older, by giving birth to more children (Grossmith 1976, 240–241).

In this respect and regarding the roused since the 1980s discussion about the differences between Western and Eastern European patterns of family formation Karl Kaser even insists on the existence of particular patrilocal-household cycle complexity household formation system which meant that households could be expected to remain undivided for generations. The southern variant of this pattern is called by him Balkan patriarchal family (covering the territories of the contemporary Republic of Macedonia). It was characterised by a particularly patriarchal culture: joint property ownership, strong blood ties, ancestor worship, patrilineality, patrilocality, the bride-price, blood feuds and a patrilineal kinship structure (Kaser 1996, 383). Other authors questioned the general validity of the pattern of Balkan patriarchal family, especially its frequency of occurrence, publishing historical evidences and demographic data which convincingly showed that the average size of rural families prevailing in the Balkans seldom exceeds six members at an average, and the household divisions were rarely postponed over generations (Gruber and Pichler 2002, 363–370; Gruber 2004, 282–294; Todorova 2006: 133–150)⁶.

In this study I agree the proposition that these were the general ideal norms and rules for what people ought to do and how they ought to behave (Doja 2010, 360), even though the real behavioural norms and rules of what most people actually do, often contrast with this ideal. They were still vital and valid when the mass Albanian migrations to Western Europe started under the given circumstances, discussed in the previous paragraph. Before leaving their home villages, almost all of my respondents, who were part of the first wave of migrants, had lived in extended

⁶ These studies confirmed the fact that in the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century multiple and extended family households existed, but represented extremes in the statistical sense in the region. Simultaneously, a household could be larger at one time and smaller at another; multiple and extended families could be considered as stages of developmental cycles in domestic groups rather than as a taken-for-granted (Backer 2003, 25–26; Doja 2010, 355–356).

or multiple family households. A large number of them had already been married and some had had children. When they went abroad, their wives and children stayed behind and were taken care of by the husbands' parents, unmarried brothers or sisters, in the most cases living together in extended rural families. Women took care of children but all the decisions concerning marriage, education, visiting relatives, taking part in rituals and any activities that could affect the family prestige were prerogatives of the head of the household. The women and children of the men working abroad were very cautious about their behaviour in order to maintain their unblemished reputation. They were put under close scrutiny by the local community and were expected to be quite humble and modest in their public actions. This behaviour was required in order to guarantee the honour of both the man working abroad and the entire family household (cf. Reineck 1991, 135).

Ideally, when an Albanian went abroad to work, he did not go 'for himself', but to improve the living conditions of his entire household (ibid, 143). The point of his reference was the place of origin and his family living there relying on his economical support. Thus, in order to secure their existence, Albanian households sought for a certain number of male members in work age, which could create possibilities for varied economical engagements. Some of the men could be occupied in agriculture, and others could be engaged in different profitable activities (trade, wage labour etc.). One or two male members of the household could be sent abroad as *gastarbeiters*. Sometimes they alternated with each other. This, on the one hand, ensured male power for the agriculture work in the home village, on the other hand – enough control upon the women and children who remain there. Money earned abroad was sent to the male head of the family who was in charge of controlling the finances, and not to one's own wife or children:

"Then [1970s] there was a huge family, probably about 30 people. Uncles, cousins, brothers – all of them under the same roof [...] We, my brothers and I, went abroad in order to earn money. And when we came back each of us gave our earnings to our father. The oldest man held the money. It didn't matter that I was the one earning it – he was the one taking it. He was taking care of our children – deciding whether to go to school or work. He was the chief, he kept the business accounts" (♂, born in 1944, worked in Germany, lives as a pensioner in Delogožda, near Struga).

The money sent by the migrants was (and still is) essential to cover primary everyday needs of the household: housing, food, medicines, clothes, education. It was used to meet expenses for electricity, water supply, taxes and fees. There were also investments of the earned abroad money in business undertakings, but in their majority these are small firms based again on family and kinship relations (Markov 2013, 251–255). Although the migrant-workers were physically away from the household, they were active members in its life and their efforts were orientated towards meeting the needs of the complex family unit. The migration of one or more household members to Europe functioned as income insurance for the household. The relative importance of sending money from abroad and from agriculture, for instance, was not evaluated or compared; both were necessary and important for the

family (Backer 2003, 50–52). In general, in this period the family's migration strategy coincided with the personal interest of the migrants (cf. de Haas and Fokkema 2010, 546).

This began to change in the 1980s when family reunion and family formation caused the number of women and children abroad to increase, affecting in turn the structure of the Albanian transnational household and relationships among its members. As a result, conflicts – related to individual interests or gender – started to emerge, bringing about splits within many of the extended family households. Often my respondents pointed out that migration had certainly contributed to the emergence of nuclear families and their gradual endorsement as a dominant form of family life. The previous interviewee explained:

“No matter whether you liked it or not – you had to obey your father, because he was the oldest man. Such was our tradition. And actually we respected each other much more. [This lasted] probably until 20 years ago. And after that you take your family abroad and you don't need to be obedient any more. The old people don't have that influence any more. The children are independent of their parents and do not pay much attention to them, as they used to. They also do not give money to the oldest men.”

Regarding this, the ideal model in which a migrant from a complex family goes abroad to work and he does not go “for himself” but to improve the life of his household, more and more became cracked, over the course of time. The indisputable prestige of the household head was put to the test. It became more usual that he was increasingly dependent on the migrants' money to pay household bills or other taxes. Gradually these resources became so important that prestige shifted to the provider away from the family household head (Reineck 1991, 143). Migration led in some cases to significant economic prosperity on a personal level and enabled a man to provide well for his nuclear family without the support of the larger kin network. The decision of some of my younger respondents to buy a flat in the near town where his wife and children to live, instead to invest the money in construction of shared with his brothers big house (or even separate house but within shared courtyard) also is a strong illustration of this tendency.

Furthermore, since the 1980s the biggest dilemma all Albanian men working abroad were faced with has been whether to take their nuclear family along with them to the foreign country or not (cf. Reineck 1991, 128–30). More often the migrants choose the first option. Especially the generation growing up during the 1970s in families with absent migrant fathers had been influenced to take their families with them when they themselves went away during the 1990s, giving their own children what they saw as a better family life. Living abroad with the family changed migrants' priorities and relationships with their relatives: the focus turned towards earning to provide for the nuclear family abroad, while remitting to villages of origin took on second place (cf. Akkaya and Soland 2009, 8).

Women's position abroad, especially in the present days is also changed: although in many cases they are still bound up in family care, women generally en-

joy more legal rights and social freedom, being away from the control of the other household members and avoiding the local village community constant surveillance. Many respondents admit, though unwillingly, that in the recent years many of the wives have started to work and to contribute financially to the nuclear family unit. Perhaps the most important status changes happen for women who have grown up and completed their education abroad. Their position, in turn, has an important influence on changing patriarchal attitudes towards the women's role amongst people around them, including men. A young interviewee presented one such example:

“My wife was there, her father had been working in Italy for many years and he had taken her there as a child. When we married, I also went there [...] I barely speak Italian. But my wife speaks [Italian], she is fluent. What I do not know, my wife knows. She is working in a pasta factory and she found the first job position for me.” (♂, born in 1990, from Tearce, near Tetovo but working and living in Italy).

The new patterns of consumption and lifestyle caused by the transnational migrations affected the routine norms and social values. The culture of migration became so deeply embedded in the Albanian communities that many of the youths (especially men) in the studied villages came to perceive migration as an important “rite of passage”, as a source of honour and prestige and a way to attain higher status. The ideas about successful marriages and suitable marital partners were also changed – young people wanted to marry partner who had migrated because they were considered the ideal breadwinner and life spouse. This leads us to the second domain of status and prestige examination – the community.

Social status and prestige within the (trans)local Albanian communities

In the studied villages prior to the 1970s when mass migration had not begun yet, few people had significant wealth. The demonstration of this wealth was considered as immoral and ostentation was strongly condemned by the local community. According to traditional Albanian ethics, the personal and family status derived not from material wealth, but from moral reputation, from the degree to which a family has collectively upheld the community's moral code. Changes in values and social relations caused by mass migration have affected the system by which Albanians rank each other in terms of prestige and honour within the community. Today social status is based on a combination of moral reputation and material prosperity, with different weight accorded to each by generation. In this respect, my findings confirm the Reineck's statement that in older generations (born in 1930s–1950s) a migrant, no matter the money gained by him, could not maintain a high status in the community, if he had broken the moral code by having an extramarital wife abroad. For younger men (born in 1960s and after that) this behaviour is not so harshly judged, if the man continues to provide livelihoods for his family in the village of origin (Reineck 1991, 145–146). Thus, the importance of remittances and material wealth to achieve social position and prestige has increased over the years.

The most visible are the funds invested in the reconstruction or construction of houses, as well as in their furnishing. Entering an Albanian village one might be impressed by the number and the size of the houses created by such remittances, with varied planning and architectural features

“We Albanians have a different mentality – if you have a house, you have everything! The house has the first place of importance. If you are five brothers, five houses are built. If there is not so much money, the building goes upwards – a separate floor is built for every son.” (♂, born in 1963, worked in Germany [1985–98], lives in the village of Želino, near Tetovo).

Expensive construction materials and many decorative architectural elements (columns, parapets and cornices) are used with the aim of demonstrating richness and wealth. Sizable financial resources are spent for furnishing and modern household equipment – a washing machine, a dishwasher, an electric cooker etc. A computer, a plasma TV and a video camera typically complement technical equipment of the household. One of my respondents told me with great satisfaction about the expensive fireplace with its steam heating installation which he had ordered from Germany (Markov 2013, 251–253; see also Pichler 2009). These large multi-storey houses are an obvious mark demonstrating well-being and enhanced social prestige. They are, indeed, visible for the local community. My interlocutor explained:

“There is a contest – to build a larger house than others. There are such people, many people. For instance, if he has an old house, he will demolish it and erect a new one. And it should be larger than the neighbour’s house. In order to demonstrate himself he would even build a swimming pool.” (♂, born in 1955, worked in Switzerland [1988–99], living in Tetovo).

The grand weddings can be also noted. It is typical not only for the Albanian community, but also for other migrants from western Macedonia such as Torbeshes and Turks, that weddings are organized between July and August, the period in which most migrants have their annual holidays and return to their origin villages. Daily there are two, three, sometimes more weddings. The bride is often from the same village as the groom. Even after several decades of emigration, mixed marriages with Swiss or Italian or German spouses are an exception.

The wedding is intangible and tangible expression of family well-being and social position. It is a luxurious and lavish ceremony (cf. Pichler 2010, 220–224; Bielenin-Lenczowska 2010, 519–520). All relatives and friends are invited – those living permanently in the village, as well as migrants arriving from various countries around the world. Nowadays the number of guests usually reaches a few hundred. A noisy procession with expensive cars, loud Albanian music, blaring horns and Albanian flags passes through the village, so as to stress the wealth of the migrants. Evening festivities continue in the home of the groom, but during recent years this part of the ceremony has begun to shift to local restaurant halls. According to my respondents, such weddings can cost between 5000 and 10,000 Euros.

The number of guests, the luxury cars in the procession, and the expensive gifts are important symbols of well-being and social positioning of the household.

“The man brings many pieces of gold jewellery for the bride – necklaces, rings, bracelets. He also wants to demonstrate in this way how strong he is, how big the family is.” (♂, born in 1964, lives in the village of Livada, near Struga).

The expressions of success and economic power easily translate into prestige and social status within the local community. Organizing such lavish ceremonies with hundreds of guests is possible and rational only in the place of origin, since only the local people can comment on their customs and only for them the material and social aspects of weddings can be observed and valued (Bielenin-Lenczowska 2010, 520).

Another visible expression of prestige and claims for improved social position is the manifestation of well-being to the native village when migrants return during the summer holiday. For several weeks the villages are buzzing with people and expensive cars with foreign registration number plates – from Austria, Switzerland, Germany, USA etc. The cafés, pubs and restaurants are overcrowded during the entire day. Every returnee from abroad is expected to treat relatives and friends, showing the amount of his earnings. Young people show off the latest mobile phone models or walk along the main street of the village wearing designer clothes. When it comes to non-material markers of migrant's prestige, using German, Italian or English words and phrases in public is especially significant⁷.

Besides these individual remittances and expenditures, my interlocutors in all settlements of my fieldwork spoke about the existence of a special fund, to which every migrant has to contribute a certain sum of money every year. Such collective remittances have been invested commonly in public infrastructure and services in the village of origin. The money has been used for asphalted streets, electricity and internet supply, building healthcare establishments, playgrounds, bridges and fountains, renovating schools, religious sites or supporting vulnerable households such as those seriously ill or hit by some disaster. Aid is provided also for the transportation to their native places of those, who had died abroad, so that the burial ritual could be performed at the village of origin (for more details see Markov 2015b).

In the context of all this, it becomes more clear that an important cause for the continuing financial support and expenditures of migrants' means in their places of origin is connected namely to issues of social status and prestige. Boris Nieswand (2011) points to the specific status paradox that can emerge in the context of contemporary mass migration. Most migrants are employed in host societies as

⁷ My findings correspond to Bielenin-Lenczowska's (2010) study of the transnational ties among Muslim Macedonian migrants in Italy and their families in the Struga region, as well as to Hemming's (2009) study of migration status paradox and display of wealth from young Albanian migrant men during their visits to their hometown in northern Albania. Such a situation is not unique to the Balkan context, however, as shown by Nieswand's (2011) research among Ghanaians.

unskilled workers, often illegally, and are thus unable to gain a high position there. On the other hand, the economic inequalities between the receiving and the sending country create incentives for migrants to transfer resources earned in richer countries to poorer countries in order to increase their purchasing power. The studied by me case is similar. The employment of Albanian migrants is varied, but all note that they mainly do the donkey work, activities that local workers do not want to do and. Most of them are being employed in the construction (bricklayers, plasterers, painters, joiners, etc.), horticulture, forestry, restaurant business (waiters, confectioners, bakers, pizza chefs, etc.)⁸. Many migrant workers live in small flats, often rented by several people (and simultaneously they manage to build multi-stored houses in their places of origin). The lack of language understanding, the different behaviour, manners and values of the people from the host societies and the clash of different stereotypes and prejudices in the relations and communication are additional factor which often creates troubles and crisis situations⁹.

Therefore in general, a migrant's success depends not so much on their status abroad, but on the remittances sent to origin areas. Regardless of their often low social position abroad, Albanian migrants have a chance to become socially prestigious in their home village or town and, thereby, to raise their status there. For that reason the results of migration must be made visible to the community – their efforts to help the family members left behind, the contributions to the collective fund and the participation in the community rites enables them to claim for recognition of social position in the villages of origin. A recognition that they receive, as passage of an interview evinces:

“We can only be proud of the emigrants! Whenever there is some campaign here, humanitarian or something else – they would always help us, no matter where they are: Austria, Switzerland, Canada, and America, all of them help.” (♂, born in 1965 in the village of Delogožda, worked in Germany).

Simultaneously, this helps them to cope with inferior positions, the various forms of discrimination and loss of social status in the workplace. On the other hand, the described acts of ostentation have one more meaning – they are an expression of the desire for and the imagination of a modern and prestigious way of living (Pichler 2009, 231). Such demonstrations also aim to show well-being and raised positions in more broad sense, involving the whole Macedonian society. This issue is discussed shortly in the last paragraph of the article.

⁸ On many occasions they have to change the workplace repeatedly within a few months, sometimes even weeks, before they manage to find a suitable job.

⁹ Although my respondents claim they have Swiss or Italian friends, later in the course of the interview it was made clear that such interaction are only within the workplace. Such people are important exclusively for the dimension of instrumental support, but speaking of general advice about professional or family affairs, economical and emotional support they rely on other Albanians. Similar are the observations of Janine Dahinden for the Albanians in Switzerland (Dahinden 2009: 255) and Marijeta Rajković Iveta and Rina Geci for the Albanians in Croatia (Rajković Iveta and Geci 2017: 289–290).

The political status claims and positioning in the Macedonian society

Recent studies show that the first generation of immigrants often remains more dependent on relationships with persons of the same ethnic background, while the second generation has fewer reference people of the same ethnicity. Often children of the first generation Albanian migrants have better education and work positions than their parents have had and keep interpersonal relations with people of other ethnicity. However, the ethnic mobilization remains very strong even among the second generation in the studied case. The continuing with big intensity ethnic and political tension in Macedonia is an important factor for prolongation of ethnic consolidation and empathy, as well as for maintenance of close ties with the areas of origin. Therefore, until the end of the 1990s, many of Albanian migrants saw their stay abroad as temporary and lived with the general idea to going back. This reality was reflected by way of the commented important economic and financial support, but also through political mobilization (Iseni 2013, 232–233). In this respect, contributing to the survival and welfare of relatives, and participating in different community fests, rituals, and activities migrants continually reaffirm they still are and will stay ‘Albanians’. This participation, especially in the context of ethnic tensions between Albanians and Macedonians, is an important marker of their community identity. Nowadays solidarity with the community is often seen as a sort of political statement (Pichler 2009, 228). For the Albanians from the Republic of Macedonia it is important to declare clearly their Albanian identity, regardless of their place/ country of life and work.

Undoubtedly, the socio-political clashes in Macedonia are a reason for many members of transnational Albanian communities to be highly politicized and strongly engaged to the developments in the country and to be very active in a political lobbying in Western countries in order to influence public opinion there, as well. The political mobilization among the Albanian diaspora in the 1980s and the 1990s was commented in the public discourse, as well as in some research studies. This was reflected in a number of ways: an active political and public life was developed; various Albanian formations were established in order to support political activists in the places of origin. Different publications in the media, organizing public demonstrations, petitions and various other campaigns were also important (Iseni 2013, 233).

In this context, my findings support the Robert Pichler’s argument that a strong catalyst for the Albanian efforts for modernization and urbanization of the places of origin is the memory of the preceding period of restricted rights and the established stereotype among the Macedonian population that the Albanians were incapable of overcoming their underdevelopment and backwardness (Pichler 2009, 228). According to the common Macedonian narrative the economic growth of the Albanians, the luxury houses and cars etc. cannot possibly be based on hard work, but are result of trafficking, smuggling and other criminal acts. My Albanian interlocutors do not deny that there are such people within the community. Such people, however, are a very small part of the vast majority of Albanian workers abroad who

have achieved prosperity with many years of hard work, far away from their birth-places, relatives and friends:

“You see the houses here, not all of them are built with work. There are various people here. There are also criminals, of course.” (♂, born in 1965 in the village of Delogožda, worked in Serbia, Slovenia, Croatia, since 1990 he has lived in Switzerland).

“The times when our parents went abroad, and when I was there, there was no drug, prostitution. It was only hard work. Some people accuse the Albanians of dealing with bad criminal things. There may be such people, but they are very rarely.” (♂, born in 1947 in the village of Želino, worked in Serbia).

The Albanians are seriously challenging the Macedonian allegations today, proudly showing off their higher prosperity and steadily improving living environment in their residential places, unlike the considerably depopulated and neglected Macedonian ones. They become conscious of this situation:

“They (the Macedonians – note by me, I.M.) know that the Albanians have money. The reality is that Macedonia is kept up by the Albanians. The Western part of the country is much richer than the Eastern one. When you go to Strumica, Štip, Gevgeli, a macchiato costs 20-30 denars, but when you go from Skopje to the west, it starts from 70 – up to 120 denars. So, the standard is much higher in these regions, where Albanians live!” (♂, born in 1981 in Skopje, living in the USA).

“All the roads you see here are built through such campaigns. Nothing from the state. [...] The new school is built. In all the building of the school the Ministry contributes only 30 per cent, while 70 per cent of the funds are from the emigrants.” (♂, born in 1965 in the village of Delogožda, worked in Germany).

Therefore, the ostentation described in the previous paragraph is addressed not only to the Albanian local community, but it need to be visible to the Macedonian population. In many cases the newly built houses are decorated with Albanian symbols, and the loud Albanian music and flying Albanian national flags are obligatory element of every wedding ceremony. Such processions are still more loud and luxurious, when they pass through villages and towns inhabited also by Macedonians. The demonstration and ostentation of wealth, the use of Albanian national symbols in architecture and rituals are designed to demonstrate strong feelings of Albanian identity and ethnic solidarity. The same is relevant to the collective donations for improvement of the living environment in the Albanian villages. Thus, in the context of ethnic tension and contradictions between Albanians and Macedonians, the remittances and strong social networks between Albanian migrants and their places of origin are a way new positions and claims for increased role of the Albanian population in the Macedonian state to be declared (Pichler 2009: 228).

Conclusion

The continuous transnational mobility between the host West-European societies and places of origin in Macedonia is a typical feature of Albanian migrants. They are locally anchored abroad, where they work and live. Recently, they have raised and have educated their children there. This locality is an important resource for building up their transnational project. Although during the last two decades the share of a short-term temporary migration have been reduced instead of a more long-lasting one, many Albanian migrants continue to be strongly emotionally and economically engaged with their places of origin in Macedonia. A combination of various factors affect this transnational engagement – Albanian norms and culture; conditions and migration policies of receiving countries; socio-economic and political situation in Macedonia, etc.

The relations within the complex transnational networks, however, have determined a number of characteristics and changes of community socio-cultural patterns. The intensive migration since the 1970s has significantly changed the area of origin and local communities. Its effect on socio-cultural developments goes beyond financial impacts – migration affects the general process of social and cultural transformation through changing traditional rules, behaviours, social relations and stratification.

The study showed the ways in which family-kin networks constituted across borders are marked by generational and gendered differences in social power and status. This often leads to tensions and intra-family conflicts, but looking more generally and in long time perspective transnational migration socially empowers and reinforces the positions of the people who send remittances from abroad; they are also bearers of new ideas, technologies and possess knowledge and experiences which have become highly valued by other family members. To be a migrant for many Albanians is a way to gain significant social capital which is commonly transformed to honour and prestige, helping them to change their personal status. The established man-woman relations also have been affected, especially during the recent years when the cases of family migration have increased. Women, due to their transnational involvements, especially these of the second and third generation, become claimants of rights and agency which aim at improving their social standing within the family and community, as well.

The data showed that the places of origin remain important for sizable part of migrants. The study of social status within the community's context seems to be essential in explanation migrants' transnational practises, as they are involved in simultaneous processes of constructing social status at the place of origin and abroad (Anghel 2013: 11). Thus, the local communities remain a unique context for making claims and valorizing status and social positions (Goldring 2009: 163), but the sense of migrant's status abroad is also crucial in this processes. All members involved in the transnational field conduce to the transformation of the regimes of stratification. The (often) low social position abroad is compensated through the strong transnational engagement. It is a way for raising social standing and validating migrants' self-esteem. They spend earnings on consumer goods, housing, vehi-

cles or production, use clothing, behavioural manners, spend money for treating and show ostentation participating in local ceremonies, but also take part in community-level service and infrastructure projects. Thus Albanian migrants reaffirm and maintain their community membership in order to confirm their important social role and to raise their status, as well.

Last but not least all these processes change the look and feel of a place, stimulate the local economy (Markov 2015, 253–255) and make people feel they have a crucial role in such transformations. Although economical crisis and ethno-political tensions in Macedonia are catalysts of migration, they also motivate people to maintain transnational ties and to return continually to the country (cf. Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994) – reconstructing houses and public infrastructure in their villages of origin, but also spending earnings for buying estate and starting business in neighbouring towns. Collective remittances are important organizational resources that permit the development of new power hierarchies within the Macedonian society. Thus, Albanian community manages to change the social, economical and political landscape and to generate social and political capital used in the running process of renegotiation of their role and community position in the country.

Although here I examined the three domains of status separately, they are in reality interconnected and the presented data clearly confirmed this statement. What future direction will transnational migration among the Albanians from the Republic of Macedonia take? What kind of new socio-cultural transformations will occur in the years to come? These questions in the context of the new socio-political and economic developments in Macedonia, in the Balkans and in the European Union, as well, leave the topic opened for further research.

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