

Research

BORDERS AND BORDER ZONES: DIFFERENCES AND EQUALITIES

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THE TORLAKS REGIONAL IDENTITY(-IES) AS A MOTIVE FOR CROSS-BORDER COLLABORATION IN SERBIAN-BULGARIAN BORDER ZONES

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Abstract. Article presents a case study of local group named *Torlaks* inhabiting border zones of Serbian-Bulgarian states border. Because of mostly conflicting policies of neighboring Balkan states during 19th and 20th centuries the border was quite impervious. For decades, cross-border communication was interrupted. Over time, under the same ethnonym on both sides, and because of the imperviousness of the border, different identity contents developed, therefore one can speak about two different *Torlak* identities. The *Torlaks* on both sides of the border got different national identities - those in Bulgaria are Bulgarians, and those in Serbia are Serbs. In the beginning of 21st century political and economic situation encouraged cross-border cooperation between the two countries and especially between the inhabitants of border

zones. New process of reunion of separated group and development of common identity arose. Article describes the main manifestations of this process.

Keywords: identity, border, border zones, policies, torlaks

A bout the genesis and the development of the Torlaks regional identities

There are several variations of words with a root *tor* in languages of Mongolian, Tibetan and Turkish people, where they denote some type of spatial confines (“bird trap”, “net”, “lasso” etc.). The words with this root came into the Balkans with the Turks. In Balkan languages, these words are part of animal husbandry vocabulary,¹⁾ with their morpheme “tor” meaning a confined space, a sheep pen. On the other hand, they appear in the form of “torlak”, with an exception of Romanian language and eastern parts of the Balkans that were influenced by Roman where they appear in the form of “tur-lak”.²⁾ The word torlak, with meanings referring to various types of limitations, was mentioned in Turkish sources dated from the 16th and the 17th century.³⁾ However, in the Balkans, as a Balkan turkism used in Bulgarian, Macedonian, Albanian, Romanian and Serbian language, it has various meanings and belongs to an offensive vocabulary, and it refers to closed mindedness or blindness, meaning primarily “stupid”, “fool”, “rude”⁴⁾ (Тричковић, 1997). In various dialects of central and even western Balkans, as well as in Romania, this word is used as an extremely offensive expression concerning personal characteristics. On the other hand, in eastern parts of the Balkan Peninsula, it mostly refers to regional or local groups, having pejorative meanings – rarely, as a group label (as in some parts of Macedonia), more often as a name (in parts of Bulgaria, Serbia and Macedonia).

The Balkan Peninsula is distinguished for its mountainous terrain, surrounded and carved by river valleys and coastal depressions. Because of such

terrain, in this area, two basic farming types with many variations developed – crop production in lowlands and animal husbandry in mountains (although either type includes some activities of the other one). In conditions in which the farming is a predominant economic activity, lowlanders used to be in better position in respect of economy than highlanders, because they could produce much more food. Because of severe living conditions in the mountains and lack of food, highlanders were forced to go down to the lowlands and sell or exchange their products (wood, potatoes, cattle, leather, pottery) or work as toilers (in farming, construction) for grains. Apart from going down to lowlands occasionally, they inhabited the lowlands continually. This migration generated identity relationships in which, almost by the rule, the lowlanders were above the highlanders on the social ladder. Therefore, numerous regional and local identity relations between the highlanders and the lowlanders are typical of the Balkans (it seems that this relation is also typical of Mediterranean Basin), which have many variations. In the eastern part of the Balkans, lowlanders used the words “Torlaks” and “Turlaks” as offensive names for their highland neighbors, with whom they were in contact, marking them as primitive and, in respect of culture, inferior (for example: Кръстева, 1997a; 1997b).

Such relation between the highlanders and the lowlanders with such use of terms Torlaks or Turlaks is typical of almost whole Old Mountain (the mountain of Balkan). In many cases the lowlanders from both sides of the mountain use these names for certain Staroplaninci⁵⁾ (or Balkandzije, as they are often referred to) they are in immediate contact with. However, this relation is somewhat specific for the north-western part of the mountain. First, from the aspect of geography, the area of interaction of people, which gives this identity relation, is wider than other areas. Planinci⁶⁾ use two names for inhabitants of the part of the Danube valley that spreads over regions of Vidin, Montana, Lom, Vraca and Kozloduj: those who live in Polje⁷⁾ are called Pol-

janci, and those who live at the foot of the mountain are called Dolnjanci . These lowlanders, again, use the terms Torlaks or Turlaks for highlanders, but not only for highlanders in a part of the Old Mountain that is covered by a wide belt of Belogradcik, Cuprene, Ciprovcı and Berkovice municipalities which are the hinterland of their part of the plain (including the slopes of the mountain), but also for all the people on the other side of the mountain. That is because, there is no plain on the other side, behind the mountain, but masifs continue, cut by dells. Second, only in this region, unlike other Old Mountain regions of this interaction, are highlanders (denoted as Torlaks or Turlaks) different from lowlanders, not only by the place they live, the way they make their living or by their lives in general, but by their ethno-culture – by their speech, costumes, customs and folklore heritage. In fact, these highlanders belong to a part of a wider ethno-cultural region in the central Balkans, which is, from the ethno-cultural aspect, a transitional region between the bodies of Serbian and Bulgarian nations. The best definition of transitional aspect of Torlak's ethno-culture was given in 1852 by Vuk Stefanovic Karadzic⁸⁾ who explained that a Torlak was a man who spoke neither pure Serbian nor pure Bulgarian language (it was the first mention of Torlaks in literature) (Караџић, 1852, p. 744). From the ethno-cultural aspect, the identity relation of the Torlaks with other groups becomes more complex because it involves not only Poljanci/Dolnjaci, but also other collateral groups. The biggest and ethno-culturally most different group are the Vlachs. Third, this part of mountain ridge was used in 1833 and 1878 for establishing state borders which affected later development of identity relations in this area. Fourth, only in this region did positive self-identification of a certain population with the name Torlaks or Turlaks occur.

When Serbian-Turkish state border was established along one of the Old Mountain's ridges in 1833, communication that generated identity relation ceased. In the meantime, the border became Serbian-Bulgarian in 1878,

than Yugoslav-Bulgarian in 1918 and again Serbian-Bulgarian in 2003. While the interaction between the highlanders and the lowlanders of the Danube plain on the Turkish (and later Bulgarian) side of the border continued, people who were on Serbian side of the border were denied the contact with this grain field on the east and the north-east with which they had been connected for centuries before. Therefore, these people turned towards north, establishing new (previously collateral) communication along the river of Timok where, because of the border, a new administrative center emerged - the town of Zajecar. Zajecar had previously been a large village at a crossroads. A new interaction began, between the Torlaks and the Vlachs. The Torlaks lived in the White Timok's valley and on the surrounding slopes of the Old Mountain and the mountain of Tupiznica and the Vlachs were from the region of Zajecar and Negotin. There were also some other minor ethno-cultural and identity groups (Macaci, Kosovljani, Izvorci). Because of predominantly conflicting politics of neighbouring Balkan countries in the 19th and the 20th century (which resulted in wars during this period), the border was "rigid" until 15 years ago – for decades, cross-border collaboration was at its minimum. Therefore, concerning the term Torlaks/Turlaks, on either side of the border, two different identity contents began to develop, in different social conditions and with different identity markers. Additionally, the members of these identity contents have become part of two nations, Serbian and Bulgarian, regardless of the fact that they used to have and still have the same regional identity.

In Ottoman Empire, and later in Bulgaria (near the borderline), the above identity relation between the lowlanders Poljanci/Dolnjaci and the highlanders Torlaks/Turlaks continued long after the border was established. After the Second World War, during socialist era, the economic base of this relation ceased to exist – privately owned land was nationalized and in state agricultural companies everybody had the same privileges, no matter if they were from the plains or from the mountains. However, even in those times, this

identity relation remained to exist because of migrations of highlanders to plains, which were supported by the state. They were still different in the terms of ethno-culture and posed a threat as competitors for open posts. But, after the migrations ended, with pejorative meaning still lingering, the term Torlaks/Turlaks more and more became a term for denoting a category without derogatory meaning. In the 80's of the 20th century already, one could see not only the first signs of decreasing derogation, but also signs of positive self-identification with the terms Torlaks/Turlaks. The number of these positive signs increased in the 90's of the 20th century and in the 2000's, and the self-identification was even institutionalized. It rests on the following markers: pastoral mountainous environment, specific "exotic" ethno-culture, the Torlak speech above all, their physical and mental strength and firmness, extreme open-heartedness and hospitality contrary to unfriendly and reserved lowlanders, their free spirit that had resulted in several rebellions against the Turks and social movements in the first half of the 20th century. In the "transitional" 90's of the 20th century, and also during the 2000's, because of the collapse of the industry, bordering municipalities on the Old Mountain, which are rich in natural and cultural resources, decided to base their development strategies on tourism. The Torlak identity that comprises specific "exotic" mountainous ethno-culture became one of the tourist markers. Positive self-identification with the Torlak identity in Bulgaria arose right in the small Old Mountain municipalities of Belogradcik, Cuprene and Ciprovci. However, in encounters with others and being named the Torlaks/Turlaks, migrants from the entire north-west area of the Old Mountain (and central Balkans, in general) also adopted this identity. They inhabit the western part of the lower Danube plain, which includes the towns of Vidin, Montana, Lom, Kozloduj and many villages in their vicinity.

In Serbia, the term Torlak/Turlak came into use in denoting ethno-cultural categories due to Torlaks's migrations towards Zajecar. It happened

in conditions of great ethno-cultural diversity which was partly due to the encounters of local ethno-cultural groups that arrived here in the 17th and the 18th century and partly due to economic migrations of various ethno-cultural groups from distant areas of eastern and south-eastern Serbia towards Zajecar in the mid-20th century (from the ethno-cultural aspect, immediate vicinity of Zajecar is unique Balkan intersection point of strongly different migration flows). The offensive social meaning, although lingering for a long time (in jokes, for example), was subdued and derogation began to diminish. The diminishing derogation was also largely due to a myth (in the form of a tale) that spread nationwide after the First World War. According to it, the Torlaks were named after a hill called the Torlak, near Belgrade, where they defeated Austro-Hungarian army during the war. The source of this myth, which was strongly in harmony with post-war and national attitudes, is a coincidence that the Torlaks (as a part of the Timok division) fought and won the battle on the place with the same name.⁹⁾ This myth, which is still wide-spread, has largely contributed to positive self-identification with the term Torlaks. During the socialist era in Yugoslavia, and in Bulgaria as well, agriculture-related pejorative of Torlak identity disappeared. However, the key factor of the positive self-identification were massive migrations to industrial centers of Bor and Zajecar, that took place from the 50's to the 80's of the 20th century, in the times of socialist industrialization (which was supported by the state). The migrants' self-identification with the term Torlaks becomes stronger in encounters with other citizens. They relate the term Torlaks predominantly with the area of their origin and their speech. This area, usually referred to as "Torlacija", is considered as an identity marker, beside their native dialect. The generations of people who moved to the towns remained in closed touch with their parents, relatives and friends from the villages they came from. The villages remained to be an important field for social expression. These people feel strong nostalgia and also strong sorrow because of the decline in popula-

tion in their homeland and the deterioration of its infrastructure. The strongest identification with the term Torlak is in the valley of the White Timok with surrounding slopes of the Old Mountain and the mountain of Tupiznica, whose former administrative and now informal center is the village of Minicevo (half of the slopes belongs to Zajecar municipality and half of them belongs to Knjazevac municipality). The identification also develops in migrants who now live in the towns and encounter other people and who came from the same or similar ethno-culture from other parts of Zajecar and Knjazevac region. It was nostalgia and sorrow because of deterioration of their homeland that induced the founding of the Homeland society of the Timocani-Torlaci¹⁰⁾ in 1997. Because the first migrants were very old at the time of the foundation of the Society, over the years it was handed down to their descendants and inhabitants of Minicevo, and it still contributes to the affirmation of the Torlak identity.

As a descendant of migrants from this area to Zajecar, I have been a member of the executives of the Homeland society of the Timocani-Torlaci since its foundation in 1997, and have been its president since 2000. Therefore, I have participated in building up the Torlak identity and, on the other hand, as an insider anthropologist I have observed its development. In 2001, I published the first paper dealing with the Torlak identity (I published another paper on ethno-culture as early as in 1995), and since 2007 I have been conducting scientific research for my PhD thesis *The construction of the identity of the Torlaks in Serbia and Bulgaria*, which is supposed to be defended at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, by the end of 2014. All data presented in this paper are the result of researches of the Torlak identity and my personal experience.

The Torlaks' identities as a motive for collaboration in bordering areas

Therefore, today, there are, actually, two different Torlak regional identities, which are nominally the same, and which are divided by Serbian-Bulgarian border line. Poor cross-border communication that was due to unfavorable historical and political circumstances resulted not only in no collaboration between the Torlaks on either side of the border, but the groups also were not aware of each other until the end of the 20th century. Both sides considered Torlak regions in their countries to be the only existing Torlak area, whereas inhabitants on the other side of the border were considered as members of neighboring people – Serbs or Bulgarians (this attitude remains even today).

In 1995, I participated in the first international ethnology conference in the town of Svrljig in eastern Serbia. Among other participants, there were ethnologists and folklorists from Bulgaria. In spite of mutual respect, those were the times when there was still a distance between Serbian and Bulgarian scholars because of historical and political reasons. However, among other Bulgarian ethnologists there was Petko Hristov from the Ethnographic Institute with the Museum of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Since we were unburdened with national restraints, we started talking about the Shops¹¹⁾ and the Torlaks (which are often correlated in the literature, and even confused as if they were the same). It was coincidence that both of us originated from the Serbian-Bulgarian border – his origins were of the Shops from the region of Tran in Bulgaria, and mine from the areas of Knjazevac and Minicevo, both of us with distant origins from areas in the country over the border.¹²⁾ This conversation immediately developed in exceptional collegiality, collaboration and friendship that have remained until now. It was exactly after that conversation that Petko Hristov learned about the Torlaks in Serbia, and I learned about the Torlaks in Bulgaria. Up to now, we have deepened that knowledge (and the

knowledge of both people, Serbs and Bulgarians in general), by visiting each other privately, exchanging literature and data and providing conditions for researches in the opposite country. Soon after that he came to Serbia and, among other things, conducted a research in the Torlak area for the purpose of writing his book *Communities and holidays* (Христов, 2004). In 2000, I was invited to participate in an international conference held in the town of Trojan in Bulgaria with a several-day field expedition in the vicinity of the town, organized by an NGO DIOS from Sofia which was led by Toso Spiridonov and with Petko Hristov, as a member of its management. Since the NGO also relied on European funds, one of the objectives of its strategy was overcoming national restraints among scholars in the Balkans. At this conference I presented a paper *the Torlaks* in Serbia (which was later published in the conference proceedings) (Крстич, 2000). This work gained interest, so T. Spiridonov and P. Hristov decided to organize next year's conference with an expedition in the Torlak region in Bulgaria. Therefore, in 2001 the conference was held in a border village of Stakevci, in Belogradchik municipality and expedition was carried out in other Belogradchik's villages. This was my first (of many later) opportunity to have a field encounter with the ethno-culture and the identity of the Torlaks in Bulgaria. With the help of the organizers who revealed my affiliation and my interest in the Torlaks to journalists, local press informed their citizens that there were also the Torlaks on the other side of the border and that one of them, who was even the president of a Torlaks' society in Serbia, was a participant in the conference.

During the conference in Stakevci and the expedition in the area of Belogradchik in August, 2001, local population was informed that one of participants was a Torlak and the president of Torlaks' society in Serbia, which gained considerable publicity and eventually led to a special invitation for a meeting with the mayor of Belogradchik municipality Emil Tsankov (whose ancestors are also partly from the Serbian side of the border, from the border

village of Novo Korito). In his public appearances as a politician, he had already pointed to the collaboration with the border municipalities in Serbia. It was after his initiative that the Kadibogaz border gathering was revived. After many years, it was organized in the collaboration with the Knjazevac municipality, only one month before the conference in Stakevci. It has been held ever since (about the border Gathering at Kadibogaz see Крстић, 2011). On this occasion, I informed him about activities of the Homeland society of the Timocani-Torlaci and we agreed that common Torlak regional identity can be a motive for future collaboration and discussed its possible forms.

However, the mayor of Belogradchik was not the only local official who was intrigued by my presence. One day, while I was doing my field work in the region of Belogradchik, a group of officials from the Chiprovci's town hall came especially to meet me, in order to establish collaboration with the Torlaks on the other side of the mountain. The delegation consisted of Ljusjen Simeonov, the mayor, Antoneta Kostova, vice mayor and the manager of the town's tourist organization and Milena Nikolova, the director of the museum. During the meeting in Stakevci I was informed that previously strong industry in their municipality collapsed during transition and that the tourism had been adopted as one of the pillars of future development. It had also been decided that the Torlaks/Turlaks identity should be one of their tourist markers, wishing to make Chiprovci (before others) become "the capital of Torlaks". In respect of this, they had already renovated an old house as an annex to the museum, which was specified to be a museum of the Torlaks. At the time, they were also organizing a folklore gathering "We are the Torlaks – we are heroes", which was supposed to be held within a month, with a round table on the Torlaks. They openly said that one of the motives for cross-border collaboration concerning Torlak identity was an opportunity for them to get the access to the EU funds allotted for cross-border collaboration. They invited me and my colleague Dragoljub Zlatković from Pirot to be their guests the next

day. We accepted the invitation and experienced exceptional hospitality, learned about the cultural heritage of Chiprovci and saw an exhibition about the Torlaks. We were invited to be the guests of Chiprovci during the folklore gathering and to participate in the round table. We were also asked to hand their invitation letters over to representatives of local governments and tourist organizations in Zajecar, Knjazevac and Pirot. Therefore, delegations from Zajecar, Knjazevac and Pirot, including Dragoljub Zlatkovic and me, attended the gathering and the round table. Local press reported about the meetings with an information that the Torlaks exist in Serbia, too.

After the fall of the communist regime in Bulgaria, in 1989, with the rooting of democratic and pro-European ideas, new conditions for opening to the neighbors arose. However, in Serbia, during the 90's of the 20th century, a hard nationalistic regime of Slobodan Milosevic was still in power. Since the border was burdened with smuggling because of international economic sanctions imposed to Serbia, it was a restraining factor in respect of institutional cultural, scientific and other forms of collaboration. According to an agreement reached in the socialist period, there was feeble collaboration between the municipalities of Belogradchik and Knjaževac, but not so intense. It was restrained, with occasional sport and cultural exchanges. However, in 2000, the regime of Slobodan Milosevic collapsed, and Serbia adopted democratic and pro-European principles. After many decades, the two countries were, in respect of politics, in harmony. The distrust and distance between them, which were nourished by both sides, disappeared slowly. The representatives of local authorities, even of state institutions, started to relief the tensions related to the border, cross-border collaboration intensified and it has been improving ever since. The border restrictions in respect of communication were radically reduced. All of this was done with great appreciation of the people around the border on both sides, who never wanted to stop collaborating with their neighbors. With the introduction of European standards at border crossings,

moving across the border ceases to be an unpleasant experience (with sporadic remains of negative occurrences from the previous period). The transit of people from bordering areas to the neighboring country with the purpose of shopping and having a good time intensified. In bordering areas, the collaboration between local and state authorities also intensified. Already in 2001, a new democratic government in Knjaževac accepted a proposal of Belogradchik's mayor for reviving of once-existing gathering at the saddle of Kadibogaz., and since then the gathering has been held every year in the second half of July. Schools in Knjaževac and Belogradchik have mutual, friendly exchange and collaboration. At the municipal and state levels mutual cross-border projects concerning environment, culture, tourism and other fields have been carried out, with mutual applications for EU funds. Because the funds support cross-border collaborations, to local governments, institutions and prominent individuals they are, as mentioned above, important motive for collaboration of this type

The conference in Stakevci, and later, the festival with the roundtable in Chiprovci took place in 2001, after the democratic changes in Serbia, when the first revived Kadibogaz gathering took place and when there were no political obstacles to hinder the collaboration. As mentioned above, the age of deeper relations around the border came. But, a hiatus in the Homeland society of the Timocani-Torlaci, the indolence of Serbia's tourism practitioners and especially personal changes in border municipalities after elections in Bulgaria led to a halt in collaboration.

In 2003, the Homeland society of the Timocani-Torlaci was active again, and in March of 2006 it managed to organize a reunion of the Torlaks in the region of Timok, with a party called "The Torlak's evening" (the first two gatherings took place in 1998, after the Society was founded). Coincidentally, near the end of 2005, in the time of preparations for the "Torlak's evening", Miodrag Milenkovic, a then member of the steering committee of

the Society, a geography teacher and a member of Minicevo's local council was in Belogradchik within cross-border collaboration of elementary schools. He invited Ljudmil Antonov, Belogradchik's mayor, to visit Minicevo on the day of a local "Mladenci" fair (a day dedicated to the Holy Forty Martyrs of Sebaste), be the guest of the local council and attend the "Torlak's evening" party. A nine-member delegation of Belogradchik municipality visited Minicevo, saw the fair and other interesting places, had talks with local council's members about possible collaboration and attended the party in the evening. The party was typical Balkan in style, a frolic with 200-300 attendees, plenty of food and music. Among people who addressed the attendees was the Belogradchik's mayor.

The guests from Bulgaria were fascinated with such the large number of people, gathered because of their Torlak identity they didn't know it existed in Serbia. They liked the fact that there was the Society of the Torlaks in Minicevo, so they decided to found a counterpart in Bulgaria. It was the idea of Ljubomir Veselinov, a member of the delegation and a town hall's secretary and PR. In the autumn of the same year, on October 7th 2006, they had a Launch event in order to found "Zdrebce,"¹³⁾ their Torlaks' society. The Torlaks' homeland society was invited to attend this event and its delegation consisted of its members and people who work in institutions in Zajecar, Knjazevac, Minicevo and on the regional level and who support the Society. It was welcomed wholeheartedly. Accompanied by the hosts, the delegation saw the cultural heritage of Belogradchik area (an old fortress and the Museum of history) and attended the Launch event. The hosts of the event were Ljudmil Antov, Belogradchik's mayor and Ljubomir Veselinov, the initiator and the future president of the "Zdrebce" Torlaks' society. The Launch event included gala dinner with music, dance and folklore performances. On this occasion, among others, as a president of the Serbian counterpart, I also addressed the attendees and so did other prominent representatives of Serbian Torlaks. The

“Zdrebece” Torlaks’ society was registered officially in January 2007, and its statute stipulated close collaboration with the Homeland society of the Timocani-Torlaci from Minicevo.

However, after the launch event and before the official registration, on December 1st, 2006, in the Art gallery in Belogradchik, Minicevo’s local council and the Homeland society of the Timocani-Torlaci organized a photo exhibition that depicted the history and the reconstruction of former county hall in Minicevo. The exhibition manager was Dragan Blagojevic, an active member of the Society and a chronicler of Minicevo history. It was an opportunity for local press to especially stress the Torlak identity of the inhabitants on both sides of the border.

After the foundation of Bulgarian society, the collaboration between the Societies intensified. Since then, delegations of the Torlaks’ society from Bulgaria have been regular attendees at the “Torlak’s evening” party. The party has been organized by the Serbian Torlaks’ society. Until 2009 it was held in Minicevo and after that it was held in different villages of the Torlak region (in Knjazevac and Zajecar municipalities) and has been supported by Knjazevac and Zajecar town halls as well as by some other municipal and regional institutions. The Bulgarian delegation usually consists of the representatives of the “Zdrebece” Society, Belogradchik’s mayor, other municipal officials, representatives of certain villages and village and municipal cultural institutions and business people. On the day of the “Torlak’s evening”, Bulgarian delegation comes to Minicevo. It is warmly welcomed and joined by the Serbian counterpart for breakfast. Then it is received by the highest officials of Knjazevac or Zajecar municipalities (depending on where the party is going to be held), when they discuss their collaboration friendly, especially the possibilities of opening the Kadibogaz crossing point. Accompanied by the hosts, they go about seeing places of cultural heritage and factories¹⁴⁾ and after that they have gala lunch. In the evening they attend the “Torlak’s evening” party.

Serbian officials, usually the president of the Society and a mayor, in their speeches address Bulgarian guests, welcoming them, and, in return, Bulgarian officials, usually the president of their Society and a mayor, address the party stressing the collaboration between the Societies and municipalities, the brotherhood of Torlaks from Serbia and Bulgaria, two Slavic and orthodox people.

Beside these formalities, some visits were somewhat specific. For example, in 2007, at the reception in Knjazevac's town hall, in usual friendly atmosphere, an initiative for opening of the Kadibogaz border crossing was signed. The objective of the initiative was to relax visa ban in bordering area, since the ban had been imposed to Serbia. It was signed by the representatives of both Torlaks' societies, two municipalities, village councils of Minicevo and Novo Korito from Serbia and Salas and Stakevci from Bulgaria. The initiative was sent to the presidents and prime ministers, as well as the ambassadors of both countries. That year, with the help of Bratislav Djordjevic, the president of Zajecar's Chamber of commerce, the signing was attended by the president of Vidin's Chamber of commerce Rumen Vidov and its secretary Krasimir Kirilov. In 2008, the delegations from Belogradcik consisted of folklore chanting groups from Belogradcik's villages of Salas and Stakevci, which performed during the "Torlak's evening". Then and also in the next year of 2009, one of the guests was the first secretary of Bulgarian embassy in Belgrade Detelin Dimitrov, who stayed in Minicevo for the whole day including the "Torlak's evening". In 2008, the guests from Bulgaria said they wouldn't like the collaboration to become reserved, because Bulgaria recognized Kosovo as an independent country the day before. They explained the recognition was an act of obeying to the EU, in spite of the fact that people in Bulgaria, especially those in bordering areas, oppose that decision and want to have friendly relations with people on the other side. In 2010, together with the Homeland society, the village council of Mali Izvor was a co-organizer of the

“Torlak’s evening”, and the visit of Bulgarians was more business-wise. Slavoljub Bozinovic, the president of the village council and the owner of a machine parts factory (and the founding member of the Homeland society) introduced the guests with other production plants in the area. Since the Bulgarian delegation predominantly consisted of businessmen, the cultural heritage of the area was neglected. In 2013, on the 10th anniversary of the “Torlak’s evening”, a three-day celebration took place in the village of Grliste. The Bulgarians stayed for two days.

In spite of their wish, because of lack of money, the “Zdrebece” Torlaks’ society from Belogradchik neither organized any gatherings nor invited people from Serbia for three years after their Launch event. The Puncevs, a business family from Belogradchik, helped the celebration of the 4th anniversary of the Society’s foundation, which took place on October 23rd 2010. The family liked the collaboration by reason of Torlak identity and they decided to participate. The “Zdrepece” society has organized the celebration of this event ever since and it usually takes place in October or at the beginning of November. It is a sign of return hospitality. Delegations from Serbia are selected by the Torlaks’ homeland society and usually consist of its prominent members and representatives of Knjazevac municipality, Torlak villages and municipal and regional organizations. They are usually welcomed warmly in Belogradchik and then both sides have lunch, after which they go sightseeing and visit important factories.¹⁵⁾ In the evening, they have gala dinner, with dancing and music, sometimes with folklore chanting or drama plays. During the dinner both sides exchange gifts and address present people, stressing the collaboration and close relation between the Torlaks and the two people.

In 2013, the gathering was special in a few aspects. It was the first time that the guests were welcomed outside Belogradchik, in the village of Salas, where they had lunch after they had been shown the village and its church and seen an ethno-exhibition including folklore chanting. Then, five

members of the delegation, including me, went to see the villages of Chuprene and Gornji Lom, whereas other people went to Belogradchik. The five went to Chuprene, because Dragan Avramovic, a member of the Serbian society, born in Ravna near Knjazevac, wanted to see the village for the first time in his life. One line of his roots comes from this village. They were received by the president of the local council Vanjo Kostin. Then, they visited the village of Gorni Lom and were received by the village's president Ilijan Ljubenov. Marko Ristic (who was born in Balinac and now lives in Knjazevac) also wanted to see the village for the first time. That's because one line of his origins comes from Gorni Lom.

Except regular visits on the occasions of the "Torlak's evening" and the anniversaries of the "Zdrebce" society's Launch event, there have been reasons for additional ones. On November 1st, 2007, a four-member delegation from Belogradchik, consisting of the representatives of the Torlaks' society and the village of Salash, attended a ceremonial session and the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the Homeland society of the Timocani-Torlaci in Minicevo. On November 5th, 2011, seven people from Belogradchik, members of the "Zdrebce" Torlaks' society, with its president Ljubomir Veselinov, came to Zajecar to see Zdravko Colic in concert, in Sport center's arena in Zajecar. My family was their host. Our guests visited the archeological site of "Romuliana" in the vicinity of Zajecar and went sightseeing around the town as well. Then, we had lunch, with guitar and chanting of Yugoslav pop and rock music, the genre our guests liked. In the evening, they went to see the spectacle of Zdravko Colic. Our guests had wonderful impressions. Some of them were in Serbia for the first time.

Since 2011, upon invitations of the Homeland society of the Timocani-Torlaci, beside delegations from Belogradchik, delegations from the municipalities of Chuprene and Chiprovci have also come to Serbia to attend the "Torlak's evening". Cultural professionals from Chuprene had already visited

Serbia within delegations of the “Zdrebece” Torlaks’ society. The leaders of these delegations are mayors (Vanjo Kostin in Chuprene and Anatoli Prvanov in Chiprovci), and other members are municipal officials, village representatives and representatives of municipal and village cultural institutions.

In April 2007, the municipality of Chuprene and the “Zdrebece” Torlaks’ society invited the Homeland society of the Timocani-Torlaci to attend a Torlak folklore festival „Кад кум прасе и ти вречу“,¹⁶⁾ but no delegation went there. As a response to an invitation to participate in the “Torlak’s evening” in 2011, the Homeland society of the Timocani-Torlaci was invited again by Chitaliste¹⁷⁾ from Chuprene and Chuprene municipality to attend the festival. It has been held every year since 2006. The delegation consisted of the representatives of the Society, Knjazevac’s cultural center and the Museum of Knjazevac and a group of performers. This group consisted of the folklore dancing group of the Center and folklore singers, instrumentalists and actors from the region of Minicevo and Knjazevac, who participated and performed at the festival. The delegation and the performers saw the cultural and natural heritage of Chuprene and Belogradchik. Both in 2012, 2013 and 2014, the Homeland society of the Timocani-Torlaci was invited by the mayor of Chuprene, Vanjo Kostin, to attend the Torlak folklore festival „Кад кум прасе, и ти вречу“. Both times the Society was privileged to choose a folklore dancing group to represent Serbia. Since there was no group from the Torlak region, a folklore dancing group from the village of Veliki Izvor participated in the festival. Both times no delegation from the Society visited the festival, because of valid reasons.

The awareness of the existence of the Homeland society in Serbia made some organizations in Belogradchik offer it a partnership in projects dealing with cross-border collaboration, in order to apply for EU funds. Soon after the first meeting at the “Torlak’s evening” in Minicevo, at the end of March 2006, the Homeland society was a partner in a cross-border project

concerning a research in votive crosses in bordering areas. The partnership was initiated by Radoslav Mladenov, the president of the Society for nature conservation in Belogradchik, who learned that I, as an ethnologist, dealt with cult (holy) places. In spring of 2012, upon the initiative of the “Zdrepce” Torlaks’s society and Valerije Cvetkov, the director of Chitaliste “Razvitie – 1893” and the member of “Zdrebce”, the Homeland society was a partner of this center in a cross-border project aiming to improve cultural exchange in bordering areas. Unfortunately, neither of projects was approved. These examples show initiatives from Bulgarian side in order to access the EU funds, using common Torlak background.

Over the time, deeper collaboration between both Societies made them become relevant factors in cross-border collaboration between Knjazevac and Belogradchik municipalities. As a municipal official, Ljubomir Veselinov, the president of the Torlaks’ society in Belogradchik, has participated in the organization of the Kadibogaz gathering. The gathering is organized by the two municipalities every year, in the second part of July. In 2008, as the president of the Homeland society and the editor of a periodical “Torlak”, I was invited by Knjazevac municipality to attend the meeting of both sides’ officials at the gathering (the Society had already been widely recognized in cross-border collaboration and I had published articles about the Kadibogaz gathering in a periodical “Torlak”). The meeting of the officials includes participation in the formal opening ceremony and gala lunch. In 2009, in his speech at the opening of the Kadibogaz gathering, Belogradchik’s mayor, Emil Tsankov stressed that an ethnographic group of the Torlaks live on both sides of the border and that its tradition deserves attention (this is always done in speeches of all officials at the openings of the “Torlak’s evenings” and anniversaries of the Launch event) (Крстић, 2011, 1589, 1597). In 2010, as a president of the Society, I was invited by the municipality of Knjazevac to participate in the 10th anniversary of the Kadibogaz gathering revival and gala lunch, along with

other Serbian and Bulgarian officials. On that occasion, I and other individuals and institutions were awarded acknowledgments for our contribution to Serbian-Bulgarian cross-border collaboration. The acknowledgements which were awarded by the mayor of Knjazevac Mladen Radosavljevic and Belogradchik Emil Tsankov read:

The Kadibogaz gathering, on the 10th anniversary of its revival, expresses its gratitude to [name of a person or an institution] "To the eternal friendship of Serbian and Bulgarian people"/ Serbian-Bulgarian border, at the Kadibogaz on July 24, 2010.

With the acknowledgement, every recipient was awarded a badge with Serbian and Bulgarian flag. On this occasion, another declaration for opening the Kadibogaz border crossing was signed. It was supposed to remind presidents and prime ministers of the two countries and other state officials of how important the crossing point would be for people in the bordering areas and how much they need it and would like it to be established. In the name of the Societies, both Ljubomir Veselinov and I signed the declaration. In 2011 and 2012, after being invited by the municipality of Knjazevac, I also participated in the official opening of the Gathering and had lunch with two countries' officials.

Except the Kadibogaz gathering, as the president of the Society I have been invited to participate in other cross-border events. Upon the invitation by the municipality of Belogradchik, on June 29th 2011, I was a guest at St. Peter's day celebration, along with other officials of Knjazevac municipality. St. Peter's day is the celebration of the town's patron. The town's mayor, Emil Tsankov, delivered a speech in which he addressed all guests by their names, including me as the president of the Society. In the evening, together with other guests, I joined gala dinner prepared for this occasion. On January 24th,

2012, the Association of entrepreneurs of Knjazevac visited Belogradchik and saw its production facilities and cultural heritage. The visit included a meeting with a newly-elected mayor of the town, Boris Nikolov and gala-dinner. Since the Association had been included in the Society's previous cross-border projects, as the president of the Society I was invited to join the delegation for this occasion. In the same year, on July 7th, as the president of the Society I was invited by the village council of Minicevo to participate in the reception of a delegation from Belogradchik's village of Rabisha. With other participants in the event, I also signed a document concerning collaboration between the two villages.

Intensified communication, on account of the same, Torlak identity, especially between the two Torlak societies led to new contacts. Many of them were established privately, and some of them turned into true friendships. Here is an example. After being impressed by the performance of a brass band "The golden trumpets" from Knjazevac that performed at the "Torlak's evening" in Grliste and meeting people who roasted big pigs on spits (in an old-fashioned way, formerly practiced for weddings), guests from Bulgaria wanted the band to play in their country. In the same year, with my help, on June 1st 2013, this brass band performed at a gathering in the village of Prevala (Chiprovci municipality), on June 15th 2013 at the Turlak folklore gathering „Када кум прасе, и ти вречу“ in Chuprene, on August 14th 2014 at a "Balkan holiday" festival under the Kopren summit, above the village of Kopilovci and on September 6th 2013 at a gathering near a church remains of the Gusevski monastery above Chiprovci. A few guests from Grliste showed their artistic skills on the above mentioned festival in Chuprene. The president of Prevala's local council Ivan Vlcarov, a great lover of Serbian brass bands and Serbian music in general, has maintained the friendship with the members of "The golden trumpets", by visiting each other.

With my help, in September 2013, the Punchevs', the business family from Belogradchik, the owners of a "MIT" textile company, opened a "MIT-Timocanka" company in Zajecar. It hasn't established its production yet, but it is to be done soon. However, since October 1st 2013, 15 textile workers from Zajecar, mostly women, commute to Belogradchik on daily basis. This was the result of a long-term friendship, commenced and deepened through the two Torlaks' societies.

Except for the fact that all of these above mentioned contacts improve inter-personal relationships made on account of the Torlak identity, they are also widely publicized by local media on both sides because of events such as "Torlak's evening". Therefore, they have a significant impact on developing a progressive environment around the border and eradicating its negative effects on people in both countries.

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NOTES

1. As derivatives of this word, Serbian animal husbandry vocabulary includes, for example, words such as "tor" and "torina" meaning "manure" (from the tor). These words, again, give a verb "torenje" – fertilizing the soil with the manure (torina). Albanian language has a word „torllák – meaning "a village pasture", "grazing tax" (Ndreca, 1980, p. 332).

2. In some parts of Bulgaria, under this influence, in many words the phoneme “o” which is not stressed sounds as “u”, or the “o” is pronounced in subdued tone, indistinctly, between “o” and “u”.

3. In these sources it has following meanings: “Turkish dervish”, “junior disciple who hasn’t been initiated into secrets of an order”, “net”, “trap”, “catch with a net”, “catch with a trap”, “untamed horse”, “apron or a kind of scarf a junior disciple wears wrapped a few times around his neck, as a noose, (when he goes shopping), in order not to forget the rules of the order”.

4. In the languages of Balkan people the word torlak has the following meanings: “stupid”, “crazy”, “wacko”, “ignorant”, “fool”, “narrow-minded”, “confused”, “naive”, “hobbledehoy”, “savage”, “simpleton”, “rude”, “bumpkin”, “drunk“, “tipsy”, “drunk as a skunk”, “one gulping from a jug”, “dummy”, “braggart”, “boaster”, “yelling” “one that is fooling around”, “one that is trifling with the flute”, “indecisive”, “silly”, “filthy”, “smudgy”, “idler”, “fat”, “lazy”.

5. People who live in the Old Mountain

6. People from mountains

7. Polje = the field

8. Vuk Stefanovic Karadzic (1787-1864) is a Serbian philologist and the reformer of Serbian language. He had also a folklorist, ethnographer, historiographer and the most important person of Serbian literature in the first half of the 19th century.

9. The existence of more toponyms with the name of Torlak or Turlak is probably due to the fact that in specific areas people deal with animal husbandry.

10. Timocani = people who live in the region of the river of Timok, Torlaci = Serbian and Bulgarian plural of Torlak.

11. Regional group in western Bulgaria, southeastern Serbia and eastern Macedonia.

12. Petko Hristov, origins from border zone village of Naselevci. One branch of his family came from the village of Preslap in Serbia, and my ancestors are from bordering villages of Dejanovci and Osljane. One distant branch comes from Belogradchik in North-western Bulgaria.

13. Zdrebcе is a peak of the Old Mountain on Serbian-Bulgarian border, among three “most Torlak” villages – Stakevci, Salash and Krachimir. Since it is on the border, it is a symbol of the relations with the Torlaks in Serbia.

14. So far, on these occasions, the guest visited the Minicevo fair, specially organized ethno exhibitions, museums with their annexes in Knjazevac and Zajecar, archeological sites of Ravna and Romuliana, Historical archive in Zajecar, church in the village of Jakovac, a monastery in the village of Grliste, springs of hot water in Grliste and Rgoste, sport centers, wineries, factories.

15. So far, guests from Serbia visited Belogradchik’s fortress, the Museum of Natural History, the Museum of History, an open theatre, the rocks around Belogradchik and the Magura cave, wineries, textile companies.

16. “Кад кум прасе и ти вречу” [When your godfather brings a piglet for you, you should have a bag for it]; this is a Bulgarian folk proverb meaning that one should be always witty and ready to use an opportunity when it arises.

17. Now, it is a multi-purpose cultural center. In the beginning, it was just a library which later developed into an institution with various functions.

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