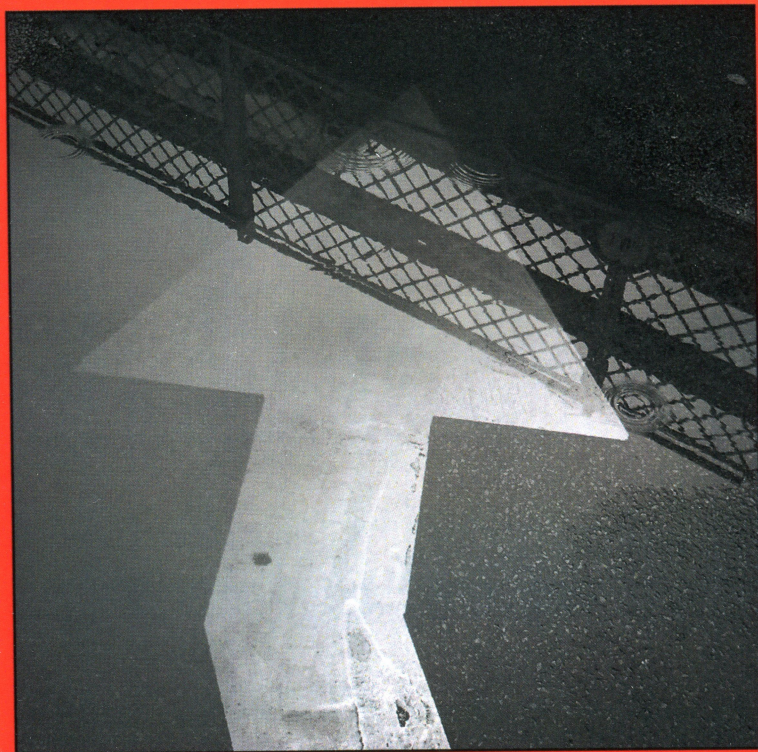


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**PROSPECTS FOR
ANTHROPOLOGICAL
RESEARCH
IN SOUTH-EAST EUROPE**



**PROSPECTS FOR ANTHROPOLOGICAL
RESEARCH IN SOUTH-EAST EUROPE**

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Prospects for Anthropological Research in South-East Europe

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The book marks a new phase in the fruitful collaboration between the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology Russian Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Ethnography Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts. It is an important publication for any future research on the development of ethnology and anthropology in Southeast Europe. The papers presented here, the topics they raise and the methods they employ, comprise an overview of the issues, concepts, phenomena and research methodologies anthropology in this has been dealing with in the early 21st century. Positions of the discipline itself, transformations of traditional culture and various phenomena of contemporary culture in Southeastern Europe are subjected to a theoretical scrutiny in the papers of this volume.

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Aleksandar Krel

Jadranka Đorđević Crnobrnja

THE CELEBRATION OF CHILDREN'S BIRTHDAYS IN BELGRADE AND CONSUMER SOCIETY

In this paper, we analyze the celebration of children's birthdays, the extremely widespread and significant form of social and/or cultural practice in Belgrade, the capital of the Republic of Serbia. This type of social practice, the base of which is the family, was imported from Central and Western Europe to Belgrade between the First World War and the Second World War. The celebration of children's birthdays achieved its full affirmation in the second half of the 20th century, when it became one of the most important family holidays in both urban and rural areas. It manifested concurrence with the characteristics of the consumer society even in the time of the socialist period, and in particular it fully coincided with the predominant ideal of the consumer society when the post-socialist Serbian society took a neoliberal political course. Despite some changes that mainly relate to the place and way of celebration, the very essence of this social practice has not been drastically changed. In this paper, we are trying to consider the role of birthday celebrations in Belgrade in the context of current economic, social and cultural circumstances.

Key words: children's birthday, birthday celebrations, consumer society, Belgrade, Serbia

INTRODUCTION. In this paper* we analyze the celebration of children's birthdays in Serbia, more precisely in its capital city. It is

* This paper presents the results of the research by Aleksandar Krel on the project: „Multiethnicity, Multiculturalism, Migration – Contemporary Processes“ (No. 177027) and research conducted by Jadranka Đorđević Crnobrnja on the project: „Interdisciplinary research on the cultural and

a widespread and very important form of social and cultural practice in Serbia and its capital. After attending the celebrations of children's birthdays, we concluded that the place and manner of their celebrations have changed significantly from the period of our childhood (the 1970s and 1980's). In the memories of our generation, our birthday celebrations and the birthday celebrations of our peers have become a synonym for entertainment organized in the homes, and their primary entertainment content was dances accompanied by the sounds of popular musical hits emitted mainly from the gramophone. The serving for the guests were sandwiches, sweets, soft drinks and unavoidable cake with crayfish birthday candles. Unlike the previously described manner of celebration, today children's birthday parties are celebrated differently. They are not organized in the homes so much, and in most cases, they are celebrated in playrooms, specialized spaces offering a wide range of entertainment and catering services for both children and adults. Seeing the transformation of children's birthdays during the last decade, we decided to conduct research about it in order to determine the social, economic, political and cultural factors that caused it.

The determination to deal with this topic is further strengthened by the fact that our colleagues, Miroslava Malešević and Dobriša Bratić, conducted research about children's birthdays in the area of Priboj and Bajina Bašta at the beginning of the 1980s, thus introducing this topic into Serbian ethnology and anthropology. Based on the analysis of the empirical material that they collected during their research, they wrote and published a co-authored article which is considered a pioneering scientific paper about this type of social practice in Serbia (Malešević and Bratić 1983). Thanks to their research, we have insight into modalities and the broader social, political and cultural context of celebrating children's birthdays at the end of the century, as well as the current theoretical and methodological approach to this topic. Reading their

linguistic heritage of Serbia and the creation of a multimedia internet portal – *Glossary of Serbian Culture*“ (No. 47016). Both projects are fully funded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

article from a distance of more than 30 years, and bearing in mind the memories of our childhood birthday celebrations, we decided to identify the causes that led to certain transformations in the way and content of the celebration of birthdays today, while taking into account the turbulent political, economic, social and cultural changes in Serbian society which happened in the past few decades. Unlike our predecessors, we decided to start our research in Belgrade for several reasons. One of the reasons for our decision is that in Serbian ethnology and anthropology no one has conducted research about children's birthday celebrations in the capital city. The plan is to expand the research to other urban areas in Serbia when conditions are met¹.

THE CELEBRATION OF CHILDREN'S BIRTHDAYS IN BELGRADE BEFORE THE BREAKUP OF THE SFRY. The celebration of birthdays – whether for children or for adults – did not exist among the mostly Serbian population inhabiting present day Serbia before the mid-20th century. Precise data on the first birthday celebrations in the mentioned area are not known, but it can be assumed that this social practice in Serbia and Belgrade was most likely imported through the economic and cultural contacts made between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Kingdom of Serbia at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, and later through the cultural contacts between the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (SHS) with France and Great Britain after the end of the First World War (see Timotijević 2006, 542–543). Expanding from the western parts of the Kingdom of SHS to its eastern and southern

¹ The empirical part of the research involved conducting interviews with interlocutors (semi-structured interviews) who live in Belgrade. We interviewed parents between the ages of 30 and 50. The interlocutors talked about their own experience of organization of birthday celebrations for their children. Empirical material addresses the celebration of children's birthdays for the past 10 years, as well as the birthday parties that were organized during the years when we conducted our research (2016 and 2017). The research that we started in 2016 is in progress. The work is based on the empirical material on the celebration of the birthdays of children of pre-school and school age (up to the fifth grade of elementary school).

parts, this aspect of social practice was first accepted among the urban population, more precisely among its richest and educated population, namely the social elite (Timotijević 2006, 542–543).

Only after the end of the Second World War, after the establishment of a socialist political organization, the celebration of children's birthdays slowly began to lose the epithet of elitist privilege and became a massive phenomenon (Malešević and Bratić 1983, 87). At that time it took on the appearance it has today (Ibid.). The causes of the popularization of this social practice should be seen in the light of the radical social, economic, political and cultural changes that have occurred to Yugoslav society in the mid-century. The leaders of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia recognized in the celebration of birthdays the ideal secular ritual, which could serve as a substitute for the religious family ceremonies characteristic for childbearing (for example, baptisms). Consequently, it became a socially desirable form of behavior, in the service of a powerful anti-religious a campaign led by the ruling structures with the goal of secularization of the state (see Malešević and Bratić 1983, 88–91). The popularization of children's birthday celebrations is reinforced by the fact that all the state institutions which were involved in the upbringing and education of children and youth, from kindergarten, primary school, to high schools, supported this aspect of social practice, and often the very celebrations took place in their buildings. In this way, through the professional care of educators, teachers and professors, social control and the institutionalization of this custom was carried out². In the 1980's, due to the favorable social climate, the celebration of children's births had become one of the most important family holidays, not only in urban, but also in rural areas (see Malešević and Bratić 1983, 88–91). Analyzing the popularization of the celebration of children's birthdays in Serbia in the second half of the 20th century, Malešević and Bratić noted that this practice was accepted by many families not only because of the

² Institutionalizing childhood is a process in which society through the institutions and educational system influences the social life of children. Though this process, children adopt new contents aimed at their social control and channeling them towards the manifestation of socially desirable forms of behavior (Tomanović 2004, 116–117).

mere effort “to adapt to the ideological climate of the times” (Malešević and Bratić 1983, 89) but also because “the abolition of traditional religious festivals has led to the impoverishment of social family life” (loc.cit.). In this regard, they observe that children's birthday celebrations are an opportunity to “maintain the continuity of those social relationships that were realized through family gatherings” (loc.cit.). They note that, through birthday celebrations, families simultaneously “send a message to the social community about the degree of their prestige” (Malešević and Bratić 1983, 94) and “express love and attention towards the child” (loc.cit.); and that the degree of the love is expressed in the amount of money spent on the organization of the birthday and in the complexity of its content (see Malešević and Bratić, 1983, 89, 94). Their conclusion confirms the assumption that the Yugoslav socialist society (ie. Serbian, as a part of it) basically is a society determined by consumption (Malešević and Bratić, 1983, 98)³.

The increase of social standard in socialist Yugoslavia was due to the credits from the West (primarily from the United States) obtained as an expression of their support for the political struggle of the Yugoslav leadership against the Soviet Union. This “process of reducing ideological differences with the Western countries” (Erdei 2012, 64–65) plays a very important role in the formation of a consumer society in socialist Yugoslavia (Erdei 2012, 64–65). Since the 1960s, there has been a significant increase in the living standards of its population, and the consumption of industrial products (footwear, clothing, household appliances, radio and TV, cars etc.) has seen a significant increase (Zindhauzen 2008, 389).

³ The idea of a socialist society as a “consumer” is in the anthropology was advocated by a certain number of authors. For example, Zigmunt Bauman and Deniel Miller insist on the difference between concepts of consumption and consumerism. They believe that consumption is a phenomena or a cultural constant which is present in all societies, however, consumerism indicates the degree of development of a society characterized by its consumption which becomes the primary meaning of human existence (see Erdei 2012, 25–27). Consequently, we can talk about consumption in socialism and consumerism in neoliberal capitalism (cf. author).

CHILDREN'S BIRTHDAYS AND CONSUMER SOCIETY IN BELGRADE. Dramatic political, social, economic and cultural changes, and the complex international political situations that Serbian society faced in the last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the new millennium, among other things led to a „social transformation” (Erdei 2012, 99); it as in other countries of the former Eastern Bloc, conditioned the “transition from planned to liberal market economy” (loc.cit). This course of events and the development of a consumer society that was subsequently followed in Serbia, and then continued during the transition period⁴, led to the emergence of consumerism in it.

Observing the place, the means of celebrating and the content of children's birthday parties in Serbia and comparing the way they were marked in the past with the practice in the present, it can be noted that they experienced modifications and transformations. The celebration of children's birthdays in the 1950's (conditions of general material shortfall in the country marked the first postwar decade) took place in the narrow family circle, with modest services and gifts which had more symbolic than material value (Malešević and Bratić 1983, 88). Both in urban and rural areas, the means of celebrating in the 1980's bring a greater number of guests (the number of friends and colleagues is in evident increase compared to the relatives). Choice of meals and beverages, as well as the modes of parties became more diversified, and it is noticeable that more valuable gifts are given, especially when celebrating jubilee birthdays: first, seventh and eighteenth. For these birthdays, besides jewelry, significant sums of money were often given, and the sum was determined by the degree of closeness of kinship between celebrant and relative; this is in accordance with the patriarchal principle of family and kinship relations that were in place at that

⁴ Moris Godelie used the term transition in anthropology to describe complex social and economic relations during the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and in today's discourse it denotes a process in which the former socialist states in Eastern Europe (since 1989) reject the concept based on totalitarianism, autocracy and planned economy and gradually accepted, a model of a society based on democracy, pluralism and a developed market economy (see Erdei 2012, 112–113).

time (see Malešević and Bratić 1983, 92; Đorđević 2000, 37–48). Birthday celebrations correspond to changing lifestyles and cultural preferences of the population and represent behavior patterns conditioned by consumption.

One of the striking differences in the manner of celebrating birthdays in the past and today is certainly the practice of a birthday celebration outside of the house. It began in the time of socialism (Malešević and Bratić 1983, 92–93), and organizing parties at McDonald's⁵ contributed to its popularization in the 1990's in Belgrade. The first restaurants of the world-famous fast food chain McDonald's were opened in the late 1980's in Belgrade, in two locations in the city center, in Slavija and Terazije. In addition to the basic catering activity that brought it global popularity, this American company offered the opportunity to organize children's birthdays as a part of its program aimed at young consumers. Birthday celebrations at McDonald's in Belgrade soon became very popular among all their actors. For parents the organization of children's birthdays was significantly easier, since the care and the entertainment of the guests were entrusted to the employees of the restaurant. In addition, the use of space and children's animation were free. The parents were obliged to pay for the food and drinks consumed by the guests. The celebrant was also given a birthday gift from the company. In addition, parents did not have to worry about the safety of their own furniture or that their guests would adulterate their homes.

This kind of birthday celebration has gained great popularity in our capital, not only because of the advantages described above, but also because it can be interpreted at the symbolic level as the identification of its organizers⁶ with the capitalist way of life and the

⁵ A similar situation was recorded by colleague Vesna Petreska in Skopje (2007, 167–176; 2008, 73–91). On this occasion, we sincerely thank V. Petreska for informing us about her research and published results.

⁶ This term we use in this article refers to parents of children and other relatives involved in supporting parents (most often grandparents of celebrant), and not professional organizers employed in agencies that provide these types of services and activities.

achievement of the “American dream”⁷. This is also supported by the fact that only wealthy citizens could afford this kind of celebration, because at that time it cost a fair amount of money, which a small number of people could afford. Along with the increase of the social standard in Serbia, at the end of the 20th century, an increasing number of parents opt for this type of birthday celebration for their children⁸. If we consider a birthday celebration at McDonald’s as a socially constructed act of consumption, it can be said that it becomes a consumer good, more precisely, the mode by which consumers (its organizers, and to a certain extent all actors), express themselves and participate in the returning of meaning to their own existence (Ože 2005, 154). This form of celebration of children’s birthdays was a kind of symbolic herald of the democratization of Serbian society and introduction of the changes that will take place in the decades which followed. The birthday parties at McDonald’s additionally stimulated the process of relocating the celebrations from the home of the celebrant, which is today considered a normal phenomenon.

At the end of the first decade of the 21st century the arrival of the first playrooms – specialized spaces for birthday celebrations – caused a decline in the interest in birthday parties at McDonald’s. This claim can be supported by changes within the spatial distribution at McDonald’s objects. Spaces that were designed for birthday celebrations were large enough to accommodate a large number of children (twenty and more) and adults. Along with the reduction of interest for their renting, these spaces are reduced. These spaces are transformed into miniature rooms that sometimes cannot accommodate more than ten children. McDonald’s birthday parties at that time were less expensive than celebrations at the playrooms. Thus, they become a symbolic expression of the fall in the purchasing power of the parents. In the second decade of the

⁷ About the emergence of the process of the development of consumer society, consumerism and the phenomenon of Americanization, expressed through the idealization of the image of the USA in Europe and its appearance in Yugoslavia, see Vučetić 2012, 351–352.

⁸ A similar phenomenon was noted by colleague V. Petreska in Skopje (Petreska 2007, 167–176; 2008, 73–91).

21st century, the birthday celebrations at McDonald's are slowly increasing in popularity, but their "classical" birthday celebrations are still less expensive than celebrations at the playrooms. In addition, the "classic" way of celebrating birthdays at McDonald's is not particularly accepted as a right kind of the entertainment for the children of school age, especially children older than 10 years, because the content is too modest and not attractive enough for them. They are happy to accept birthday parties at McDonald's as an additional program which is after a cinema show and involves only the consumption of food and beverages that are sold at McDonald's restaurants, which are not losing popularity among children of that age. For such a way of the celebration, no special room and animator are required.

Today the celebrations of children's birthdays in Belgrade, except in extremely rare cases, are held outside the home of the celebrant. The most common spaces are the children's playrooms, specialized spaces for children's entertainment. Such a trend can be interpreted in the context of the continuous development of commercialization of childhood in Serbian society⁹, where celebrations of children's birthdays are recognized as a good opportunity for making profits. A number of entrepreneurs, who bought out the shops of former trade and catering companies in the process of transition, came up with the idea of adapting them to celebrate children's birthdays. Recognizing the needs of their potential clients, the owners of the playrooms have made sure that apart from the space for celebration, they provide a variety of entertainment and take on all the details of birthday party organization. Parents, burdened by the pressure of daily duties and due to the lack of time, often decide to organize birthday celebrations in such places.

If somebody decides to organize a celebration either in the home or in some other place, they have at their disposal companies engaged in the sale of items that serve for the decoration of space

⁹ The commercialization of childhood in Serbia, begun in the time of socialism, takes its full expression in the period of post-socialism, showing its full market potential (see Erdei 2012, 73-89, 246).

and birthday cakes (balloons, confetti, sprinklers, magic candles, fireworks etc.). The possibility of selecting everything and buying it in one place shortens the time needed to organize the celebration. For this reason, the celebrations of children's birthdays, especially the first and the eighteenth, are considered to be very lucrative in Belgrade today and there is an evident increase in "small factories of entertainment" specializing in making these kinds of products. Based on the empirical material we collected during interviews with our interlocutors, we have come to the conclusion that today's parents spend between 350 and 3,000 Euros on such celebrations, and that the average birthday party lasts for three hours. It includes animators who take care of children's entertainment. How much money will be allocated for birthday celebration depends on what its organizers want to achieve, or which message they send to the public. If they only want to mark that day, then its celebration is organized in an economically rational way, and consumer practice is in line with their financial capabilities. In anthropological theory, this type of consumption is designated as "not exposed" (Erdei 2008, 352).

In some cases, parents are able to recover the funds invested in the celebration. However, the return of the invested funds and the possible financial gain do not happen often, because it is very difficult to make a precise financial calculation of the celebration that would enable it. Asked if he managed to recover the money invested in the birthday party of a child one of our interlocutors says:

"If we take into the account the cost of a gift to the child, as well as for her clothes, we spent over a thousand Euros for her birthday. Some guests gave clothes, some money, mostly those whom we gave money for birthday. We've managed to get some money back in this way, but not the whole amount. Maybe

around 500 euros, a little more. Of course, grandparents also helped financially”¹⁰.

Such consumer practice can be somewhat viewed as an expression of economically rational. However, our empirical material about children's birthday celebrations also points to the fact that more money is spent for children's birthdays than we would expect from parents if we take into consideration their salaries. Employees in education, doctors, and officials opt for celebrations that have the elements of the gala ceremony. This kind of celebration is more frequent when it comes to the first birthday of a child or with a jubilee birthday. The organization of such celebrations requires increased financial costs because it involves special clothing, shoes, hairdresser and make-up for the celebrant and parents, a band, a greater number of cakes, smoke makers, magicians, etc. Not so rarely, due to exceeding their own economic limits, parents accept financial assistance from close relatives (most often grandparents), or borrow from friends, and we reported cases when parents decided to take a loan in the bank. Justifying such actions, some of our interlocutors made the following comments:

“Our child is not worse than other children. Many tell us that for that money we could go somewhere for a holiday. My spouse and I saved the money for her first birthday. We wanted to afford that day, that’s our right.”¹¹

“We are not exactly in the situation to spend our money recklessly. Simply, it was my desire, because I enjoy the aesthetics – the look of the cake, the decoration of the table, the clothes, the space. We wanted to have a

¹⁰ The interview was conducted in Belgrade in 2016. The interlocutor (male, 41 years) speaks about the celebration of the sixth birthday that they organized in 2016 in Belgrade.

¹¹ The interview was conducted in Belgrade in 2016. The interlocutor (female, 34 years) talks about the birthday that they organized in 2016.

beautiful memory, so we tried to make it beautiful as much we could.”¹²

These examples of consumer practice are not based on economic rationalism. They represent the expression of “expended consumption” (Erdei 2008, 365), based on the ethics of wastefulness. Such consumer practice does not aim to return the invested funds, because its logical principle is that the amount of money invested in the organization of a birthday party is proportional to the social reputation that hosts could acquire in the wider social circle. This means that organizers could enjoy a greater social status in the eyes of the guests if they provide diverse entertainment content and a diverse range of food. It follows that social behavior is represented in the function of “accumulation of social and cultural capital” (Erdei 2008, 365). In addition, the aforementioned examples confirm how consumption is socially conditioned and its multi-dimensional nature, as it meets the different needs of consumers. In this case, it is noted that organizers of children's birthdays simultaneously look for self-affirmation and enjoyment (see Erdei 2008, 360–364). Such consumer practice enjoys an expansion at the time of consumerism, in which consumption becomes, among other things, a polygon for expressing its own social status. In such social and economic conditions, as the children are getting older, their demands grow increasingly because they are surrounded by meanings and social values that are determined by consumerism¹³. In that sense, a modern (consumer) society, dependent on consumption, seeks to ensure that each individual is, in childhood, “educated” in the spirit of a good consumer, that is, turning it into a predictable consumer (Vujačić 2017, 25). Parents and children also expressed the need to imitate the lifestyles of higher social classes, that is, to strive for it. A part of the statement of one of our interlocutors testifies to this:

¹² The interview was conducted in Belgrade in 2017. The interlocutor (female, 36 years) speaks of the celebration of the first birthday that was in 2015.

¹³ About the relationship between consumerism and life preferences, see Vujačić 2017.

“When our daughter was younger, she was at the age of ten years; she was going to an acting school together with the daughters of the owner of one TV station in Belgrade. One of them invited her to a birthday party. The child was fascinated by the various details such as cake, clothes of the invited children. She was impressed the most by a fountain from which flowed liquid chocolate, which the children could consume in an unlimited quantity.”¹⁴

Others, in the desire to impose their own taste, are feverishly searching for the most original way to celebrate the birthdays of their children. Accordingly, new places for birthday celebrations appear. It's a recurrence of so-called adrenalin zones, such as a carting track, a “laser tag” game room, a free-climbing spaces and the like. This tendency, in addition to the competitiveness of the cultural preferences for providing as much as possible for a birthday celebration, and an increasing tendency to raise birthday standards, allows the owners of playrooms to profit (see Erdei 2008, 351).

However, somewhat unexpectedly, in our empirical structure, there are also examples of the reduction of birthday celebrations in Belgrade. After several decades of long-standing practice of birthday celebrations, this phenomenon is in direct relation to the decline of the living standards in Serbia. It is expressed in the form of a merging of birthday celebrations, their organizing in the home of the celebrant or in an open space. The celebration of a child's birthday in the home of a celebrant or in a public open space (in the park, for example) is not in all situations the consequence of the financial incapacity of parents to organize their birthday in a playroom or in any other place designated for that, but rather as an expression of their desire to act contrary to the stable forms characteristic for the consumer society and consumerism. We note that there are increasing numbers of birthdays celebrated on the same day when parents have more than one child whose birthdays

¹⁴ The interlocutor (female, 48 years) speaks of the birthday that was six years ago. The interview was held in 2017.

are in a short time span (two to three months) and if they are similar in age. The examples that we recorded also show that birthdays can be celebrated together with classmates if they were born in the same month and if they are friends, or if their parents are ready for such a type of organization. In this case, the parents share the expenses for the celebration of the birthdays. The birthday celebration does not lose much of the content, the number of guests may increase, but the costs are decreasing. Empirical material shows that for renting a space for a celebration, more money is needed than for other content that accompanies the celebration¹⁵. Besides, we recorded another form of reduction in relation to birthday gifts. One of our interlocutors in relation to this practice pointed out the following:

“A group of four children has been formed, who attend the same school class with my younger daughter and who are friends with each other. When one of them calls the rest for his birthday, the parents of his friends set aside 10 euro banknote and that banknote is his birthday gift. Each of the children invites all children from the formed ‘birthday circle’, so that the same monetary value is practically exchanged between to them, and the reason for this is a ‘difficult material situation’ because some of the parents of these children ‘barely meet their ends’. For this reason, the parents, whose financial situation and opportunities are better, decided to be in solidarity with those who are poorer and their children do not differ from each other in the amount they give to each other.”¹⁶

This phenomenon can actually be characterized as a kind of economic exchange between parents, which takes place in the form of a gift among children, and by which their mutual social connection is consolidated and maintained (Staton-Smit 1989, 31).

¹⁵ Renting a space for the celebration of birthday, as well as a renting playroom (for two or two and a half hours) ranges from 40 to 100 Euros.

¹⁶ Interlocutor (female, 46 years old) talks about the period 2014–2016. The conversation took place in 2017.

In this case, through a birthday gift, a 10 euro banknote, a group will be formed, which will last for as long as its members are interested in participating in it. We also note, that in some cases as in this one, the economic unification of members of the birthday community is carried out, as its financially stronger members have expressed solidarity with the materially weaker members, expressing their readiness to accept the previously agreed material value. Merging birthday celebrations and donations are not that common so that we can talk about a general practice. Nevertheless, they reinforce the claim that the celebrations of children's birthdays are determined by economic factors and can be interpreted only in the current social, economic and cultural context.

CONCLUSION. In this paper we analyzed the social practice of celebrating children's birthdays in Serbia and Belgrade, both in the past and in the present. We gave a brief historical overview of the emergence of this social phenomenon, analyzing the main reasons for its transformation, and presented the preliminary results of our research. Analysis of the organization, content and places where the celebrations are held in Belgrade, is viewed in the social, economic and cultural context, and is based on the literature and empirical material which authors collected. It points us to the following conclusions:

- The birthday celebrations as a form of social practice had a dual function: love and attention were expressed to the children, but at the same time they weighed homogenization of members of family, relatives and friend networks.

- The celebration of children's birthdays in Serbia and Belgrade was popularized for ideological reasons. A favorable environment for its popularization has been created in society, so that already in the 1980's, the child's birthday was celebrated as one of the most important events in the holiday calendar of a significant part of the population in Serbia, and that not only in the urban areas, but also in the rural areas.

- These celebrations preserve the nature of the events that communicate the message of love to the children, but also to the

children of the relatives, friends, business partners, and in the age of neoliberal capitalism, they are increasingly turning into a *spending festival*.

- We have noted that the empirical data collected in our research so far corresponds, to a certain extent, to Bourdieu's idea of the convertibility of the four different forms of capital.¹⁷ If we were to mark the sum of money spent on the celebration of a child's birthday as an economic form of capital, or as a "effectively available resource of power" (Bourdieu 1979, 128, see Spasić 2004, 289), following Bourdieu's idea, the space in which it takes place, the number of guests, and the entertainment available make up its symbolic expression, or symbolic capital. Thus, the choice of place and mode of celebrating birthdays actually represents a kind of *strategy* the organizers utilize in order to – through the transformation of economic into symbolic capital – maintain or enhance their own position, not only among the guests but within the wider community. Because of this, the amount of effort put in by the organizers in picking the right place to have a birthday party is not surprising. Mostly, they chose specialized playrooms which offer exclusive entertainment for the guests, or choose places and ways of entertainment which have already been approved by, or became popular among children. The celebration of children's birthdays in Belgrade, as a form of social practice, is actually utilized as a complex information system which serves to display, to the wider community, the economic, social and cultural capital of its organizers.

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¹⁷ French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu uses the concept of capital to denote "all goods, both material and symbolic, which are displayed as rare and worth striving toward in a given social formation" (Bourdieu 1977, 178, see Spasić 2004, 289). In the concept of capital he sees many meanings and differentiates between its four basic forms (economic, symbolic, cultural and social). Bourdieu believes that capital, in accordance to certain rules which govern a given "field", can be transformed from the economic sphere and can be displayed in the spheres of culture, social relations or on the symbolic level (see Spasić 2004, 289–290).

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